NOVEMBER 35¢

Bestseller Mystery MAGAZINE

Wish You Were DEAD

by **Helen McCloy**

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The Deadliest Art — ROBERT BLOCH

The End of the Line — MIRIAM ALLEN DeFORD

"I'll Take Care of You" — GEORGE JOHNSON

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Bestseller Mystery MAGAZINE

November, 1958

Wish You Were Dead — *Helen McCloy* — 4

Picture a New York bound ship carrying a deadly bushmaster, a razor-toothed vampire bat, and a species of human known as murderer. Hardly a congenial group . . . and when you throw in a package of bait worth $100,000, it's a safe bet that corpses will be trimming the decks . . .

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WISH YOU WERE DEAD

by

Helen McCloy

book reprint feature

CHAPTER ONE

THE FOLLOWING PAGES are to be read only in the event of my death by violence.

The words were typewritten on a single sheet of paper, the first of forty-five pages. The paper was white, the usual typewriting size. The script had been folded once. There was a crease across the center of each page. The last page was streaked with dust on the outside, as if it had been thrust into a narrow, grimy place. The second page followed the form of a letter, in its beginning....

S. S. SANTA CRISTINA
At Sea

To the Commissioner of Police
Puerta Vieja, Santa Teresa
Sir:

Someone is planning to murder me. I don't know who it is. I have no

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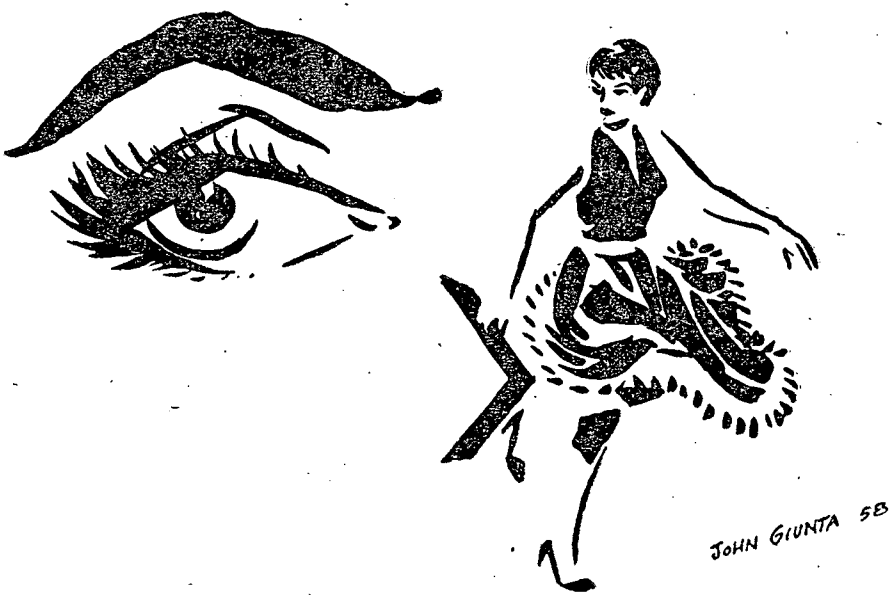

Helen McCloy has been writing mystery novels since 1938, most of them with a psychological flavor, and all of them immensely popular. Here she changes her pace somewhat to give us a relentlessly actionful thriller with just enough of her subtler side to provide an ending which defies detection. A ship bound from a Latin American port to New York provides the setting for suspenseful, spine-tingling excitement while Police Captain Urizar seeks a murderer in the tangle of deadly animals and deadlier humans . . .

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evidence. Nothing that any ship's officer would listen to now, while there is still time to save me.

Yet, in my bones, I know that before this ship touches its next port—Puerta Vieja—I may be dead. Another "accident." Like Rupert's. And the snake business.

There's nothing I can do but this one thing—write down my suspicions and put the script in the mail-bag so it will reach you when we touch port, whether I am alive or dead. That's one thing that might stop the murderer at the last moment—if I got a chance to tell him before he killed me. One thing he can't have included in his plan—or her plan. For no one on board knows anything about this script, except myself. Not even Tony.

But I don't want you to read this if I'm still alive when we reach Puerta Vieja. That would mean I was wrong about the whole thing. And this script would only make trouble for innocent people.

The first thing I noticed was an oddly disturbing incident that last day of my visit to the Lords'. I was in Rupert's study that afternoon. He had stopped working there since his accident. I was answering letters that had accumulated during the past few weeks.

Even now I can see every detail of that cool, shady study.

The French window, beside the desk, stood open. A lawn sloped down to the bone-white beach at the tip of the point. Foam fretted the waters of the inlet. Beyond, was a vast floor of lapis blue—the Caribbean. There was no sound but the scratching of my pen, and a distant clicking of shears. Across the lawn, a gardener was clipping the box hedge.

The drooping brim of a battered straw hat hid his face. Even his figure was disguised by the looseness of his white shirt and trousers. All I could see of the man himself were muscular forearms and large hands plying the heavy shears capably. His skin was a leathery brown. It might have been sunburn. It might have been that touch of Negro or Indian blood so common throughout the West Indies.

I can even remember what I was writing at that particular moment.

"Please, miss . . ."

My pen jerked to a stop and blotted the paper. I had not heard bare feet on spongy turf but now, as I looked up, the gardener was standing just outside the window.

He slid the long, wicked-looking shears into a loop that dangled from his leather belt. His hair, just visible under his hat brim at either temple, was dark and straight—more Indian than Negro. He glanced around the room as if to make sure we were alone.

"Excuse me." His voice was deep and rich—more Negro than Indian. "But I wonder if you could do something for me?"

"What is it?" I had no idea what was coming next.

From his hip pocket, he took a small sheet of paper, creased and soiled as if he had carried it for several days. "Would you mind writing a letter for me?"

"Of course not, but—why not write it yourself?"

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Something changed behind his eyes. His voice remained steady. "I don't know how to read or write."

"What would you like me to write?"

"A letter to my wife. She's in New York. She has a job there."

"Will she be able to read it?"

That was a tactless question, but he was not offended. "Oh, yes. She went to school until she was twelve. Just tell her that I'm giving up my job here, so I can go to New York."

I wrote the date and the words: *My dear wife.* I groped for other words to follow. Whatever I wrote without knowing the woman would sound forced and artificial. I did the best I could. *I hope that you are well and happy in every way. I am giving up my job here so that I may join you in New York.*

My handwriting sprawled. Already I was near the foot of his small sheet of paper. He took another sheet from his hip pocket.

"You might put the rest on this." He eyed me gravely. "Will you please put it in just these words: *I cannot stand our separation any longer. This seems to be the only way out. I'm sorry if it causes trouble.*"

I wrote as he dictated.

"Now just sign my name, please. Leslie Dawson."

"Shan't I send her your love?"

"Never mind that." A trace of impatience. "She knows I love her."

I wrote: *You know I love you. Leslie Dawson.* He couldn't read what I had written.

He had provided himself with a stamped envelope. Now he laid it before me. "Her address?" I asked.

"Mrs. Leslie Dawson, 245 West 189th Street, New York."

I addressed the envelope and returned it. He seemed grateful. "Thank you, miss. I hated to bother you. But when I saw you through this window, writing, it just came to me that you might help me out. I'd kind've like to pay you something for doing this, if you'll let me."

I shook my head. "There's no charge."

He smiled back at me. "All right, miss. If you'd rather. And thank you again. You've been more help than you realize."

He turned and crossed the lawn, disappearing into the shrubbery.

His last words lingered in my mind. *You've been more help than you realize* . . . How?

As I went on with my own letters, I missed the steady clicking of his shears. The hot stillness seemed too intense, almost oppressive, as if a storm were brewing beyond the cloudless horizon. I was glad when I heard the quick tap of Amanda's high heels.

"Haven't you finished those letters yet?"

I turned in my chair. She was rearranging the spray of passion flowers, her sun-burnished hands and arms pale brown against the chalk-white of her sleeveless dress. Everything about her always seems cool and firm—her level voice, her trim figure, her smooth, ash-blonde hair.

"All finished." I swept the envelopes into a pile and rose. "Give me a minute to say goodbye to Rupert and I'll be ready to go."

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Amanda glanced at her wrist watch with the same air of precision she used to have as Rupert's secretary before their marriage. "Say two minutes. It'll take at least that long for one of the men to bring the car up from the garage."

Since his accident, Rupert has occupied a ground floor bedroom. The traction splint on his leg accounted for the sulky look of his face that afternoon, swarthy against white pillows. The cut above his left eyebrow had healed, leaving an angry red scar. It was a narrow escape. A fraction of an inch either way and the glancing blow might have killed or blinded him.

Rupert has an interesting face—dark and brooding. He is supposed to be ruthless. At least he is so regarded by competitors since he organized his big electric power company, Western Enterprise, Incorporated. To me, he has always been charming. But then I am not one of his competitors.

His nurse was not in the room at the moment. A pocketsize chessboard lay on the counterpane. My bundle of letters caught his eye.

"Don't tell me you wrote all those this afternoon!"

"And one more." I perched on the foot of the bed. "For your gardener."

"John?" He proffered a cigarette box.

"No, Leslie." I took a cigarette. "Leslie Dawson."

Lighter in hand, he paused. "We have no gardener named Leslie Dawson."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"But the man was here a moment ago." My own voice faltered. "He was clipping the hedge. And he wanted me to write a letter for him—to his wife in New York."

Rupert touched a flame to my cigarette, then lit his own. "Have you been sitting out in the sun without a hat?"

"Of course not."

"Do you really think my servants get my guests to write letters for them? Why should they?"

"This man said he didn't know how to read or write."

"We have no one like that." Rupert frowned. "And John wouldn't hire anyone, even for a day, without consulting me. He knows I don't like strangers."

"Then who was it?" I described the man, and the whole incident.

"It wasn't John or either of the under-gardeners," he said finally. "It may be that one of our gardeners clipped the hedge and some other man spoke to you afterward. Some farmer or farmhand who happened to be passing. You didn't see the face of the man clipping the hedge. You just assumed the man who spoke to you was the same man because they both carried shears. And you say you didn't hear footsteps, even when he was close to the open window."

There was a shading of irritation in Rupert's voice. All during my visit I had noticed that any rumor of trespassers provoked his highly charged temper. Even friendly visitors were rare at the lonely house on the point. Young Tony Brooke was the only one who used to drop in regularly and he came to see Amanda.

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"Of course," he continued, "I'm assuming the whole thing isn't just a daydream. You didn't doze—or did you? The sun can play queer tricks."

"Would sun affect the ear?" I objected. "Or the fingertips? I heard the man speak. I touched the notepaper he handed me."

My indignation brought a curiously quizzical smile to Rupert's face. "Always impetuous!"

I relaxed into a smile of my own. We are cousins and there has always been a strong bond of affection and understanding between us. Even his sudden marriage to Amanda made no real difference.

The chiming of a French clock broke in upon that moment of warmth and friendliness.

My ship was sailing in an hour.

I started for the door, and Rupert called after me:

"You have that package I gave you?"

"In my suitcase. Sure you wouldn't rather mail it after all?"

"Not after losing two important letters that I did mail! Am I putting you to a lot of trouble?"

"Not at all. I'm going to Washington anyway. Why shouldn't I deliver your blueprints?"

"If it weren't for this blasted leg ..." He frowned at the splint. "You won't forget? The package must be in that fellow's hands by eight P.M. next Friday—at the very latest."

"Don't worry," I answered from the doorway. "The ship docks in New York at two P.M. Thursday. I have a reservation on the Pennsylvania that night. I'll deliver your precious documents in Washington the first thing Friday."

"That's a pretty close connection," muttered Rupert. "Suppose the ship gets in a few hours late?"

"I'll take another train if I have to sit up all night in a daycoach."

"Why you won't take a plane ..."

"I hate planes. I was air-sick all the way down here. And I love sea voyages."

"Even on an old tub like the *Santa Cristina?*" Rupert laughed.

"Tony Brooke said she'd be all right," I retorted. "He got the tickets for me. He's sailing too, you know."

"Vacation in New York?"

"I suppose so. He can protect me from card-sharpers and con-men."

Rupert laughed. "Tony wouldn't know a crook if he caught one with a hand in his pocket."

"At least he'll be someone to talk to."

"He will." Rupert's eyes twinkled. "At the bank they call him 'Babbling Brooke' ..."

Amanda drove me to town in her own car. In Quisqueya, "town" is that huddle of whitewashed shacks called Saint Andrew. Usually traffic consists of three bicycles and a lame dog, but on "boat day" all sorts of vehicles converge toward the pier at the foot of Water Street.

Another car cut in front of us. Amanda tried to swerve around it. Our way was blocked by a mouse-colored donkey harnessed to a toy cart loaded with melons. He planted his forelegs wide apart, laid back his ears and rolled one white-rimmed eyeball in our direction. Amanda had

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to stop. She put one finger on the button of her horn and kept it there. I looked around for some sign of the owner of the donkey.

We were opposite the post office. Glancing across the sidewalk, through an open window, I saw a segment of the shady interior. A bald clerk at the stamp wicket. A plump Negress in pink at the letter slot. A man in dingy white writing on a telegraph form at an ink-spattered shelf.

His hand held the pen capably as it raced across the paper, tracing whole words in almost one motion. He lifted his head. For a moment I looked directly into his eyes. Then our car lunged forward. The scene in the post office was wiped out like a moving picture flashing off the screen.

But not before I had recognized the man as Leslie Dawson. And he was writing. Rapidly, fluently, with the ease of habit.

CHAPTER TWO

AMANDA SWUNG THE car around a corner. The whole harbor spread before our eyes—two long green arms of shoreline embracing azure water dented with little waves that danced and winked in the sunshine.

"Amanda . . ." I began. "Just now in the post office . . ."

A blast from the ship's whistle drowned my voice.

"We'll have to hurry." The car halted. Amanda wrenched the door open. "Boy!"

A lad pounced on my two suitcases. We scrambled after him, through the tepid shade of an empty customs shed, into the scorching glare of the open pier.

"Your ticket!" cried Amanda. "And passport!"

My fingers fumbled. An officer beside the gangplank glanced at the papers perfunctorily, perhaps because he recognized Amanda.

The familiar ship's smell of brine, tar, brass polish and disinfectant welcomed us in a great wave on the promenade deck. A steward took my bags. I gave him the number of my cabin. I was about to follow him below when Amanda cried: "Tony!"

I turned around. Tony Brooke was leaning against the deck rail, looking down at the pier. He raised a hand. Silver flashed in the sun. Six pairs of brown heels flew into the air. Six boys dived from the pier as one.

I have always felt about Tony the way I would feel about a younger brother or nephew. His parents and mine used to be neighbors in Westchester years ago. When I first met him I was nine years old and he was a bald, blue-eyed baby in a perambulator. Now he looks exactly what he has become—an artless boy, amply provided with this world's goods. It was Rupert who had eased Tony into a beginner's job at the Quisqueyan branch of an American bank when an undergraduate frolic put a sudden end to Tony's career at Princeton.

Banking responsibilities had made no apparent change in his easy-going temper, but Saint Andrew's year-round summer climate had improved

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his tennis, while Saint Andrew's ardent sun had bleached his hair hemp-white and burned his snub nose cherry-red.

"What are you doing?" asked Amanda.

"Having fun." Tony grinned at both of us.

A woman was coming up the gangplank, followed by a man. She was small-boned with firm, smoothly rounded flesh, her skin sunned to a delicate biscuit color. She was carefully dressed in pale gray voile. Two wide bracelets of Mexican silver, set with garnets, clasped each of her slender wrists as tightly as handcuffs.

He was short and full-bodied, as careless of dress as she was careful. His crumpled linen suit had wilted in horizontal creases that followed every curve of his plump figure. The sun found a red highlight on the dark bottle cradled in his arm. The officer at the head of the gangplank greeted him familiarly. "What's that, Professor Harley? Claret?"

"No, sir." The man's speech was precise, and somehow pedantic. "Blood. For Dracula. Defibrinated, of course."

"Was that professorial humor? Or insanity?" whispered Amanda.

"They didn't laugh." Tony's eyes followed the pair.

Amanda shrugged. "You meet the weirdest people on a passenger-freighter. I'm glad Tony's sailing with you."

We fell silent as the pair came nearer. At the high threshold of the lounge the woman turned and looked in our direction for the first time. The false innocence of the round, wide-spaced eyes made me think of a Persian kitten. So did the pursed mouth and tiny chin. Yet she was physically mature. The hair, piled in smooth, artificial scrolls under the dark red hat, was as silvery a gray as her bracelets. Then she went inside the lounge, and the man followed her.

The ship's officer was coming toward us. "You're not a passenger, Mrs. Lord? Then I'm afraid you'd better be going ashore. We're sailing in five minutes."

There was a flurry of hasty good-byes. Amanda was hardly down the gangplank before it was hauled in.

"It was a nice vacation." I sighed to Tony.

"But now you have to face a summer's work in Washington," added Tony. "In an office that isn't air-conditioned."

I nodded.

"I know what you need!" exclaimed Tony with the glow of an inventor who has stumbled on a startlingly new idea. "A drink! They don't have a regular bar on these tubs, but the chief steward usually has a few bottles on tap in the lounge. What about a *daiquiri?*"

"All right—as soon as I've found my cabin and made sure my trunk isn't in the hold."

After the burning glare on deck, the interior of the ship seemed dusky and almost cool. I asked a steward the way to my cabin. He told me to go up the main companionway and down the first corridor until I came to a cross corridor that ran from deck to deck. My door would be the last on the port side, forward. I've never

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been able to think in nautical terms. I must have turned to the starboard side. For the last door forward was open and there was someone else in the cabin.

She turned with an exclamation, as startled as I was. Her sudden turn knocked an open suitcase off the luggage rack. Its contents scattered on the floor.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" I started to help her pick up the things. They were pitifully few—two dresses, a few toilet articles and underclothes. That was all. Not even a book to while away the long hours on deck. Nothing really personal—not a letter nor any scrap of writing at all. And that suitcase was the only piece of luggage in the cabin.

She frowned. "I was hunting for my passport. I had it a moment ago, as I came on board."

I turned to look at her more closely. Her skin was between ivory and amber. Her eyes were large—a liquid black iris against a white eyeball in restless motion with that look of mute anxiety you see in the eyes of a doe. She wore maize linen but the curt, Western lines of the sport dress didn't suit the full curves of breast and hip. She needed harem trousers or a *sari*. She moved with the fluid grace of an Eastern dancing girl.

"Have you any other luggage?" I asked.

"No. This is all. One suitcase."

"Perhaps the passport's in your purse?"

"Perhaps . . ."

She opened a handbag upside down, spilling all its contents on the bed. There wasn't much. Just a handkerchief—machine-made lace and heavily scented—a powder box, a lipstick, a coin purse and a few loose dollar bills. And there, among them, the missing passport, an American eagle stamped in gilt on its red cover.

"Oh!" She smiled with a relief that seemed exaggerated to me. "Thank you so much!"

I left her unpacking and went down the corridor the other way to my own cabin.

It proved larger than hers and surprisingly comfortable, all blond maplewood and light green chintz with upholstered armchairs and a studio couch so the place could serve as a private sitting room by day. There was even a shower in the adjoining bathroom.

I looked longingly at that shower but I didn't want to keep Tony waiting. I simply washed my face and hands and ran a comb through my close-cropped hair. At the open porthole, white curtains stirred lazily in the draft of the ship's motion, but it was still so hot that I left the door to the corridor ajar for further ventilation.

Searching for a clean handkerchief, I emptied my overnight bag. My hand was on the lid, about to lower it, when something I had forgotten caught my eye—Rupert's package, with one corner sticking out of the side pocket in the suitcase.

Should I leave his package with the purser during the voyage? It hardly seemed valuable enough for that. Just papers that had something to do with Rupert's latest engineering plans for

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Western Enterprise. I decided to put the package in a bureau drawer with my passport and my traveler's checks.

Still holding up the lid of the suitcase with one hand, I grabbed at the package with the other.

It was fairly big and heavy—the thickness of a ream of typewriting paper and about two-thirds the length and breadth. The whole thing was enclosed in a large stout manila envelope, with a sealed flap at one end. The Quisqueyan climate is hard on mucilage. One corner of the flap had come unstuck. And, of course, it was that corner which caught against the sharp edge of a hasp when I jerked the package out of the suitcase. I was already late for Tony's *daiquiris*. Instead of disengaging the flap gently, as I should have done, I tugged at it impatiently. There was a sudden ripping sound. The whole flap tore across. The envelope yawned open, belching its contents everywhere.

I stood still. One hand in the air, still holding the torn envelope. The other hand clenching the lid of the suitcase. These were not blueprints or notes on an engineering plan—these strips of paper that showered suitcase, couch, armchairs and floor like giant *confetti*. These were hundred-dollar bills in American currency. And there were hundreds of them.

I forgot that I had left the door ajar.

A startled voice spoke, almost in my ear:

"Good God! Have you robbed a bank?"

CHAPTER THREE

TONY WAS STANDING IN THE DOORWAY, his eyes round as blue marbles.

"Oh, Tony!" I collapsed into an armchair. "Is there any way of stopping this ship?"

"Too late for that. Besides, why would you want to?"

I could only look at him, speechless.

He was frowning. "I got tired waiting for you in the lounge. I came along to see if you'd forgotten. . . . Don't you know it's dangerous to travel with so much money in cash?"

This fatherly tone from such an infant was the last straw. "Do you suppose I'm doing it purposely?" I snapped at him. "I had no idea there was money in that envelope!"

Tony came in and shut the door. He pushed about fifteen thousand dollars aside to make a perch for himself on another armchair. "But you must have known," he said with insufferable patience. "People don't have that much money without knowing it."

"Don't they?" My voice sounded bitter in my own ears. "I don't even know how much there is."

"Then the first thing is to count it." Tony was already scooping up the stuff in handfuls, throwing it on the couch. The bills riffled through his bank-clerk's fingers swiftly as a pack of cards shuffled by a professional gambler. He looked at me with a touch of awe.

"They're all one-hundred-dollar bills. And there are ten stacks."

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"Why..." My voice came out hoarsely. "That's a hundred thousand dollars!"

"For once, your arithmetic is correct." Tony grinned. "Better steer clear of promoters, card players and decorative members of the opposite sex until you've ditched your dough."

"But it isn't mine. The money is Rupert's. I suppose he gave it to me by mistake."

Tony laughed. "Look here, Rupert is pretty free with his cash, but do you think even he would give you or anyone else a hundred thousand dollars *by mistake*?"

"The envelope was sealed," I explained. "He must have given me the wrong envelope."

"This it?" Tony picked up the torn envelope and turned it over. "No address. No superscription. Seems funny to keep that much money in an unmarked envelope."

"Rupert's been ill." I was trying to convince myself as well as Tony that there was some logic in this crazy pattern of events. "He had a bad concussion after his accident."

"Accident?" echoed Tony. "I heard he'd had a fall from his horse a few days ago. I didn't know it was serious. What happened?"

"No one knows precisely. He was alone at the time. Amanda and I used to ride together before breakfast," I went on. "Rupert was already at work in his study by that time. He usually finished work about five and went riding alone before dinner."

"Then I suppose this—accident happened in the afternoon?"

I nodded. "Just after sunset. Rupert's horse came cantering up the drive without a rider," I told Tony. "The saddle was turned over—girth across the horse's back, seat under its belly, stirrups trailing. We found Rupert half a mile from the house, unconscious, with a broken leg and a nasty cut on his forehead. A glancing hoof must have grazed his head when he fell. It was a close call. A direct kick would have killed him. Even now the doctor isn't sure whether there's a fracture or not. He's going to take X-rays as soon as he can."

"The groom's fault?" suggested Tony. "He must have cinched the girth insecurely. I don't see how the saddle could work loose otherwise."

"Amanda wanted to dismiss the man. Rupert wouldn't hear of that. He was more concerned about missing some appointment in Washington than anything else. The first thing he asked the doctor was whether he would be able to fly to Washington this week. Of course the doctor said no. Rupert knew I was going back to Washington. He began to drop hints. Finally one evening, when I was alone with him, he came out in the open and said that if some friend would keep his appointment for him he could sleep in peace. It ended with my promising him to deliver a sealed package by hand. This is the package. He said it contained blueprints so—he must have given me the wrong package. Perhaps his concussion made him a little absent-minded."

"A little absent-minded?" Tony laughed again. "A man who forgets where he put one hundred thousand dollars isn't a little absent-minded—

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he's nuts! Unless . . . Are you sure this is the same package he gave you?"

"It's the only manila envelope I have with me."

"Was there a similar package at hand when he gave you this?"

"I can't remember. Of course I didn't look inside the night table drawer when Rupert pulled it open."

"Odd place to keep a hundred thousand bucks." Tony flipped one of the stacks through his fingers again, as if he hoped that he had made some mistake in counting—that the sum was really less.

"You know what Rupert is like."

"No, I don't." Tony dropped the bills. "What is he really like? When he's off guard?"

"He likes money he can handle—probably because he didn't have much in his youth. He always has cash on hand in rather large amounts."

"As large as this?"

"Of course not. I meant two or three thousand. But just now he's having some sort of legal trouble with his partner in Western Enterprise. He told me so himself. He said he had closed several of his personal checking accounts because his partner threatened to attach them. This money must be cash withdrawn from those accounts. He'd have to put it somewhere. He couldn't put it in another bank until the suit was settled."

"But a sum like this!" protested Tony. "Not even in a safe!"

"Perhaps he thought no one would suspect there was so much money in a plain, sealed envelope. If the flap hadn't caught on my suitcase and torn I would never have suspected it. I was going to toss the package into a bureau drawer with my traveler's checks."

"Now you know—what are you going to do?"

"I—I don't know." I looked at Tony blankly. "What can I do?"

"Put it in another envelope and turn it over to the purser," said Tony. "Then radio Rupert to keep your record straight with him. Tell him how you discovered the money in the envelope. And tell him you'll deposit it to his account in the first available bank the minute you land in New York."

I turned this over in my mind. "If I send such a message through the ship's radio operator, it will be all over the ship in ten minutes that there's cash on board. Even if I don't mention the sum, they'll know it's large. People don't go to all that trouble for a small sum."

"Then don't radio Rupert at all until you're safe in New York. Just give the sealed package to the purser and wash your hands of it."

"What about the purser himself? I'd have to tell him what was in the package when I asked him to put it in the safe."

"Why?"

"Tony, don't be stupid! If the purser didn't know the value of the package, how could I or Rupert hold the shipping line responsible for it if something happened?"

Tony was on his feet now, a picture of boyish perplexity, fists stuffed in his hip pockets, sandy brows locked in a frown. "How could it 'disappear' once it was in the purser's safe?"

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"Someone on board might crack the safe. Or the purser himself might get ideas with so much money at stake. In that case, the Line would never hear anything about it."

"But there are witnesses!" cried Tony. "You and Rupert."

"Is Rupert really a witness? Suppose he did give me that envelope by mistake. How could he prove to an insurance company that the money was ever aboard this ship? He could only prove that it had disappeared from his own house. If anyone wanted the money—say the purser or the radio operator—it would be a rather simple matter on shipboard to dispose of the only real witness—myself."

Tony was stunned. "In plain English, if the money disappeared, you would disappear, too?"

"Why not? On some stormy night when there was no one else on deck? It would be so easy, so absurdly easy, if the purser were dishonest. And Rupert, who wouldn't be able to prove theft, couldn't prove murder either. By the time Rupert started making inquiries, the purser might have had time to jump ship with the money and disappear. If not, he could just stick to his statement that no one had given him the money and he'd be safe. Who could prove otherwise? Rupert couldn't swear that I had had the money, that I had put it in the safe, that I had not fallen overboard by accident."

Tony had an idea. "What about me? I'm a witness now."

"The purser wouldn't know that you knew about the money," I answered. "He'd assume that he and I were the only people on board who knew anything about it. If I told him you knew, you would be killed, too. If I didn't tell him, your testimony might help recover the money for Rupert, but it wouldn't save my life."

Tony's face had grown longer and blanker during my outburst. He was beginning to realize the situation. "Then the sooner you get rid of it the better," he said crisply. "Why don't you give the purser a sealed envelope without telling him what's inside? Let the fellow think they're blueprints as you did. Tell him they're only worth twenty-five dollars. He wouldn't think of opening the envelope then, any more than you thought of opening it when Rupert gave it to you. And you'd be safe."

"But what about Rupert? If anything happened to the envelope he wouldn't recover his money. He'd just get twenty-five dollars."

"It doesn't matter what happens to Rupert's money. He has plenty of dough."

I shook my head. "No one likes to lose a hundred thousand dollars—even Rupert."

I went to the couch where I had dumped things from my overnight bag. Among them was a large stout paper envelope filled with candied ginger.

"The purser will have to know," I told Tony. "Because the shipping line will have to be responsible for its maximum insurance if anything goes wrong. I haven't got anything like a hundred thousand dollars. I couldn't repay Rupert. And he may need the money."

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"Why should you care about Rupert when your own safety and peace of mind are at stake?" Tony studied my face for a moment in silence. "You're very fond of Rupert, aren't you?"

I turned and looked at Tony. "We were engaged before he met Amanda. The engagement was never made public."

"Oh." Tony dropped his eyes, flushing because he thought he had embarrassed me.

Tony tried to change the subject. "What about the radio operator?"

"As you said, I needn't radio Rupert until we reach New York. That way, only three people will know about the money while we're at sea—you and I and the purser. If the purser is honest, we're safe."

"And if he isn't?"

"We'll chance that. And I won't tell him or let him guess that you know anything about it."

"Why? It's harder to kill two people than one. If he knew I knew, it might discourage him."

"No, I want you to be my ace in the hole, Tony. You'll be more help that way. You can keep an eye on the purser without his realizing. And if anything happens to me, you'll be able to do something about it."

I emptied the ginger into a flower vase. Its paper envelope was what shopkeepers call a "gift wrapping"—pink paper printed with gilt *amorini*. "This is the only other big envelope I have with me," I explained to Tony.

We piled the bills in two stacks and laid the stacks side by side. The bag just fitted them. I sealed its flap with scotch tape. It made a neat, flat parcel.

"About the same size and shape as a pound of chocolate peppermints," Tony mused. "If I carry it under my arm, people will be asking me for a nibble."

"If *you* carry it!" I exclaimed. "I'm the one who's taking it to the purser. He isn't going to know that you know anything about it."

"Now look here," protested Tony awkwardly. "Why can't I be the one to take it to the purser? And you be the one he doesn't know anything about? I'm used to carrying money for the bank. It won't worry me the way it does you."

"It's my responsibility, not yours," I answered curtly. "What's more, I shan't carry it under my arm."

My handbag was one of those large pouches with a strap to sling over the shoulder—white pigskin. When I removed the other contents the bulky envelope just fitted inside. I dropped my passport and traveler's checks in a bureau drawer and put my wallet in my pocket. Then I swung toward the pier glass.

"Well, Tony?" I said as jauntily as I could. "Do I look like someone carrying a hundred thousand in cash?"

Tony answered seriously. "As far as clothes and figure go, you don't."

I was amused by his frankness. "Am I too frivolous? Or too shabby?"

"Too feminine. The give-away is your face. Anyone who sees you will know you're trying to hide something."

"All right." I moved toward the door with what I hoped was languid indifference.

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Tony shook his head stubbornly. "Let me take that package to the purser for you. I can play a part. I belonged to an amateur dramatic society at Princeton and . . ."

"You may have a poker face behind footlights," I answered. "But not at close quarters, Tony. You're too young. You blush."

"In that case, I won't trouble you any further," he said with immense dignity. "If I may be permitted a word of advice—get rid of the package as quickly as you can. I'll be waiting for you in the lounge."

He stalked out, shutting the door behind him. I decided to wait a few moments until he was well out of the way. If I left the cabin close behind him, someone might see us, and I didn't want him associated in any way with my walk to the purser's office.

Now that there was no one else to impress with my coolness and pluckiness, I spent a few moments silently cursing Rupert's carelessness.

Just then I heard a woman's voice whispering low but clear. "I did the best I could. I did what you told me."

A man's voice answered in a deeper whisper. "You've bungled everything—as usual. I don't know why I bother with you at all."

"Is it safe to talk here?" Her whisper quavered now. "If anyone hears us . . ."

"What a coward you are! What could be safer than this corridor where we can see anyone coming toward us? Everyone's sure to be on deck an afternoon as hot as this. Now tell me—why in God's name didn't you get it when you had the chance?"

"I couldn't. I tried but I couldn't."

"You would have found a way if you hadn't been afraid. Now you've made a mess of everything. We're both on board together. It's too obvious. If anything happens, we'll both be dragged into it."

"What's going to happen? You wouldn't . . ."

"I might. If I had to."

"And then—run away? To South America?" There was scorn in the woman's voice. "All that risk and plan and effort so we can go to live in some hot, dirty, banana republic! What's the use of having money if you live in a place where there's no way to spend it?"

"Then I'll go alone."

"But you're my husband. I want to be with you. Why can't we settle in New York or Hollywood—any place where people are living in the twentieth century? We'll have enough money for that, won't we?"

"Money isn't enough. You know that. We'd always be exiles in New York, but after a few years we'd be at home in South America."

"Not I! And why should you always be the one who decides where we go and what we do? I've shared half the risks. Why can't I take half the reward and spend it where and how I please?"

"Because I won't let you. Why are you only afraid of others? Hasn't it occurred to you to be afraid of me?"

"Yes! Oh, yes, it has! God, why did I ever marry you?"

There was an odd little silence. Then footfalls receded.

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My eyes had found the source of the sounds—the small, grilled outlet to a ventilator, high above the door, camouflaged with the same white paint as the bulkhead it pierced.

I had only one thought now. Had anyone stood in the corridor under that same ventilator when Tony and I were talking so freely in the illusion of privacy?

I struggled to my feet and opened the door.

The corridor was empty—two long rows of diminishing white doors, converging toward a distant opening that showed a sliver of heaving blue sea.

I came to the main corridor, where the light was dimmer since it did not lead to an open deck like the cross corridor. Far down its twilit length I saw the back of a masculine figure moving away from me. At that distance, in that light, it was no more than a dark shape without detail—unrecognizable. As I watched, it passed out of sight at the far end of the corridor.

When I reached the same spot, a moment later, I found myself at the head of the main companionway. Two flights, port and starboard, met at a landing halfway down and went on in a single stair to the main lounge below. On this upper level, a circular balustrade guarded the stairwell. I skirted this balustrade, walking toward a grilled window labeled *Purser*.

The window was open. Behind the grille, I could see a dark head bent over a ledger.

"You are the purser?" I asked.

"Yes, madam."

The voice was low and rich. The dark head lifted. A pair of mature eyes surveyed me coolly, without a flicker of recognition.

Again I clung to the little shelf for support. Whether he knew me or not, I recognized him instantly. This was the face I had last seen through a window of the post office in Saint Andrew. For the third time that day I was looking directly into the eyes of Leslie Dawson.

CHAPTER FOUR

I PASSED THROUGH AN ARCHWAY into the lounge—a deck roofed and walled with glass, furnished with wicker chairs, grass rugs, and tile-topped tables, all in gay colors. At first this second lounge seemed as empty as the other. Then I saw the back of a man's head and a pair of young-looking shoulders silhouetted against a twilit sky of cloudy amethyst.

"Tony!" I slipped an arm through his. "Thank heaven you're alone! I..."

Words failed on my lips. The face looking down at me was not Tony's. The warm hazel of the eyes contradicted the hardness of the small, close mouth. The amused lips merely puckered without parting. But the eyes danced.

I dropped his arm. "I'm sorry. I thought you were Tony Brooke."

He swung around lightly on the balls of his feet. He was still smiling, but there was a kind of truculence in

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his stance. You could almost see the invisible chip on his shoulder. "I'm not sorry." His voice was deep and level. "I'm flattered. Tony's ten years younger than I."

"You know him?"

"Who doesn't? He's gregarious as a puppy."

"Oh, there you are!" It was Tony himself, coming through the archway. "I was chasing the messman," he announced. "The drinks are on their way. You know Jim Sherwood? What will you have, Jim?"

"I've ordered," said Sherwood.

We sat at a table covered with tiles in turquoise and terra cotta. That is, Tony and I sat. Sherwood sprawled on the base of his spine. There was something slack and derelict about the whole man. Something that seemed to cry out: *To hell with you and me and the universe.*

"Did you leave that package with the purser?" Tony's manner was elaborately casual. Even a stupid man must have realized that something was up. Sherwood was not stupid.

"No," I answered Tony curtly.

Tony's jaw dropped. "B—but—in God's name—why not?"

I cut Tony short with a look. A messman was entering the lounge with three glasses on a tray. He had the blue-black hair and bronze skin of a Quisqueyan Hindu.

When he had served us and gone, Tony said: "Queer jumble of races in Quisqueya. Gives me the creeps."

Sherwood laughed.

I said: "That's a typical tourist reaction. If you go below the surface, Quisqueya is dull and conventional. More British than the British."

"Is it?" Sherwood's glance shifted to me. "Where did you stay in Quisqueya?"

"I stayed with some friends—a Mr. and Mrs. Lord."

Sherwood's small, amused smile vanished. His mouth was all hardness now. Even his eyes were colder. "Rupert Lord?" Again there was that challenging note in his voice.

"Yes. You know him?"

"No." Sherwood finished his little glass of brandy and stood up. "I'm rather particular about the company I keep." He strolled toward the archway, insolence in every line of his lounging body.

"How—rude!" I exclaimed.

Tony shrugged. "He just doesn't like Rupert."

"Why?"

"Lots of people don't... What did you do with that package?"

Sherwood was still within hearing distance. I snapped at Tony: "Later, please!"

A bugle sounded shrilly from the main lounge. Tony rose. "That means dinner."

The dining saloon was a deck below the lounge. There was one large table for passengers and ship's officers. Only three places were still vacant. Tony and I took two and found ourselves opposite the couple I had noticed on the gangplank.

"Good evening!" The man beamed at all of us. "Since we are bound to spend several days in each other's company, I think we should break the ice at the start. My name is Harley—Fabian Harley. And this is my wife."

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Mrs. Harley's perfunctory smile sabotaged her husband's cordiality. Each of us muttered a name in response and tried to drown a sense of awkwardness in watery soup. But Harley was pathetically determined to be gay.

"Let's make our first meal together an occasion. Especially as a storm seems to be rising outside. Steward, champagne for all of us!"

Mrs. Harley was looking at one of her silver and garnet bracelets with obvious satisfaction. "Aren't you forgetting your responsibilities, Fabian?" she said in a bored voice. "You'll need a steady hand if anything goes wrong tonight. I wouldn't drink if I were you."

"My dear Joan, have I ever had an accident? Have any of my little treasures ever escaped? You know the boxes are well made. The finest half-inch planks of solid timber."

"But suppose the wood warps in this damp heat? Wouldn't that force the nails up and . . ."

"Joan! Did you really suppose I would use *nails?*" He was as indignant as if he had been accused of some unmentionable vice. "I always use screws. Never nails . . . Oh, thank you, steward!" Harley raised a glass of wine. "To a happy voyage and a safe harbor!"

"Screws?" repeated Joan Harley in a wondering voice. "Then why don't you unscrew the lids when you want to fill the saucers?"

"That isn't necessary," explained Harley impatiently as if he had explained all this to her a dozen times before. "There are holes in each lid, my dear, with wire mesh over the holes. There is a saucer glued to the floor of each box, directly below the hole in the lid. It's quite simple to pour blood through the hole into the saucer. So the boxes don't have to be opened for feeding purposes. They'll remain tightly shut until we dock in New York. That makes it impossible for Dracula to escape. Or any of the others."

Sherwood's bright eyes had followed this singular exchange with interest. Now he spoke in his soft, deep drawl. "Just what is in these mysterious boxes of yours, Mr. Harley?"

"Specimens. I am a herpetologist."

"Come again. What is a herpetologist?"

"A zoologist who specializes in the study of snakes."

"Is one of your snakes named 'Dracula'?" I asked.

"No. Dracula is a beautiful specimen of the vampire bat—*Desmodus rotundus rufus*. Or, as he is called in Quisqueya, 'The Surgeon'."

"Why 'The Surgeon'?" inquired Tony.

"Because his razor-sharp, canine teeth slit your skin as delicately as the most finely ground scalpel. When you're asleep you feel no pain—no sensation at all. You go right on sleeping just as if you were anesthetized, while his long, thin tongue laps up your blood. Few human surgeons are so deft."

The whole table was listening now.

"Are these—specimens poisonous?" asked Tony.

"A vampire bat's bite is not toxic

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unless he happens to be infected with disease," announced Harley cheerfully. "The species is subject to paralytic rabies and its saliva may introduce the virus into your blood stream. I really don't know whether my Dracula is rabid or not."

"Do you have snakes with you, too?" This came from the woman I had seen in her own cabin, searching for a passport. She was on my left, leaning forward, startled and fearful. Once again her eyeballs glowed pearly white against the black iris. As she turned her anxious gaze on Harley, her arm jostled mine.

"Yes, but most of them are harmless," replied Harley.

"Not all of them?" she persisted.

"Well..." He paused judicially. "Medusa belongs to a species that has acquired an unhappy reputation. That's largely because the average native, who runs into one in the bush, doesn't understand how to treat it. Medusa shouldn't cause you the slightest uneasiness, Miss—Crespi, is it?"

She nodded. "Livia Crespi."

"Medusa's box will not be unscrewed until we land in New York," added Harley.

"Do you feed Medusa like Dracula through a hole in the lid?" I asked him.

"Oh, no. I couldn't get a live rat through the hole without removing the mesh. I shan't feed Medusa at all during the voyage. A bushmaster can fast for days without discomfort."

"A bushmaster!" Sherwood's dark brows knotted. "Do you mean to tell me that you have a live bushmaster on board this ship?"

"Certainly." Harley was on the defensive, yet there was a touch of pride in his voice. "They're extremely rare in captivity. It took me two months to find Medusa—a splendid specimen, five feet and a half from her nose to the tip of her tail. If only she doesn't lose her appetite. That does happen in captivity. And it's such a nuisance—forcible feeding and all that... a bushmaster's neck is so fragile," Harley's voice rolled on. "You have to be extremely gentle or you may break one of the vertebrae."

"Thanks for the tip," said Sherwood, dryly. "But I have no intention of feeding a bushmaster, forcibly or otherwise. I suppose Medusa is in the hold?"

"No. There are drafts in the hold. She might catch cold. I sent the crabs and frogs and spiders down to the hold, but Medusa and Dracula are in my own bathroom."

"Cozy," murmured Tony. "Having your pets with you like that."

Harley glanced around the table. "You all seem to have an impression that a bushmaster is dangerous," he observed acutely. "But they never strike unless you frighten them."

"What about their frightening me?" exclaimed Tony. "I like to be treated gently, too. The vertebrae in my neck are awfully fragile."

We were all rather grateful for the diversion when a door opened. The purser came in quietly and took the one vacant chair. He murmured an apology for being late and asked the steward to bring him the meat course.

"Yes, sar, Mr. Mendoza."

I tried to look elsewhere—at Harley

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or Sherwood or Tony. But my eyes kept coming back to this man whom I knew as "Dawson" and whom the steward had called "Mendoza."

His gaze passed over my face indifferently, as if he had never seen me before. His manner was composed, even abstracted.

After dinner a lashing rain made the open decks uninhabitable. We all drifted toward the enclosed deck. Its glass walls ran with rainwater as if sluiced with a hose from outside. A black dark hid the rest of the storm, but we could hear it in the wail of wind and crash of waves and feel it in the rolling deck underfoot. The enclosed deck was empty but at the threshold a voice greeted us.

"....and once again Representative Jefferson Stiles, Chairman of the House Committee on Federal Expenditures, told reporters that he was dissatisfied with the terms of the contract proposed by the Acme Construction Company for building a dam on the Wanasook River. Stiles said, and I quote: 'I'm sure my committee will throw out the bill to appropriate federal funds for a Wanasook Valley Authority. I, for one, am opposed to this whole scheme of crackpot legislation. Why should a gang of bureaucrats and professors use the plain, honest folks of the Wanasook Valley as guinea pigs for another experiment in government-owned power projects? Private power companies, such as Western Enterprise, are already giving the Wanasook Valley all the electrical facilities it needs. What if the project would provide jobs for a handful of unemployed veterans? Aren't there other veterans, just as deserving, on the payroll of Western Enterprise, who would lose their jobs if this scheme went through?' End quote.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, may I please take a moment to say something of vital interest to all of you who may be unemployed."

Sherwood glanced toward me. "Now you know why I don't like Rupert Lord."

"What do you mean?"

"He runs Western Enterprise, doesn't he? And I was born in the Wanasook Valley. Think it over."

"Excuse me."

The soft voice startled us. Everyone turned. The purser was standing in the archway that led to the main lounge. I had not heard his approach. Just as I had not heard it that morning when he came across the grass to the window of Rupert Lord's study.

He smiled deferentially. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's our custom to ask passengers for a small donation to the Seaman's Home. Anything you care to give will be deeply appreciated." He set an open basket on the table.

"Why, of course." Tony set the ball rolling with a five-dollar bill. It was followed by a number of ones. Sherwood alone contributed a coin. My hand went to my pocket. I had put my wallet there when I emptied my handbag. Now I felt a handkerchief and nothing else. It was gone.

I looked up to find the others all watching me.

"I—I've mislaid my wallet," I stammered. "Tony, can you lend me a dollar?"

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Poor Tony colored richly, even more embarrassed than I. "Terribly sorry, old girl, but that was my last bill. I've nothing on me but some change."

I turned back to the purser. "I have traveler's checks. Will you cash one?"

He bowed imperturbably. "Certainly, madam. If you'll bring it to my office, I'll open the safe. Meanwhile, we must search for your wallet. When did you see it last?"

"Oh, a few minutes before dinner. It's not important. There were only two or three dollars in it."

I got out of the lounge somehow. Alone, I climbed the main companionway clinging to the balustrade as the steps rocked under my feet. A stewardess had been in my cabin. The porthole was sealed against the storm, the bed turned down for the night. I pulled out the bureau drawer. My passport was still there but my traveler's checks were gone.

I sat down to think things out. I would have to have some cash for incidentals. I could take one of Rupert's hundred-dollar bills and replace it when I reached my own bank in Washington . . . Then I remembered an old traveler's check book in my other suitcase. The thief had missed that. It was tucked in among stockings and slips. And there were two checks left, for fifty dollars each.

With my fountain pen, I filled out both. I had no blotter. While the checks were drying, a new thought struck me: What am I going to do with Rupert's money now . . .?

It was fully twenty minutes later when I went down the corridor to the purser's office. He was waiting patiently behind the grille. I laid the checks on the shelf with all the nonchalance I could muster.

"Can you cash both for me? Here's my passport for identification."

Impassively he accepted the checks. "How would you like the money, madam?"

"Nine tens and ten ones, please."

He counted out the bills. I gave him a dollar for the Seaman's Home.

That afternoon I had been too stunned to challenge him. Now that Rupert's money was hidden, I felt bolder.

"Thank you. I've seen you in Quisqueya, haven't I? At Mr. Lord's? You were out of uniform, dressed like a gardener."

His look of bland bewilderment was almost convincing. "No, madam. Mr. Lord has sailed with us several times, but I've never been to his house in Quisqueya."

I hesitated. What was the use? Obviously he was going to deny everything. Who would believe that such a fantastic incident had happened?

I turned and went down the companionway to the glass-enclosed deck.

A burst of dance music greeted me. All the others were still there and they had turned on the radio again while they drank nightcaps. They felt safe in the heart of danger—like profiteers on a spending spree ignoring the threat of inflation.

Tony drew me aside. "We must talk. Your cabin?"

"No," I whispered. "There's a ventilator. Every word said there can be heard in the corridor."

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"Then this afternoon...? Oh, Lord! Where?"

I tried to think of some other place. "What about the hurricane deck?"

"In this rain?"

"I want privacy. Don't you?"

"O.K. In ten minutes."

Tony's voice went on more loudly making small talk for the benefit of the others. I wasn't listening.

Why should the purser of the *Santa Cristina* masquerade as a gardener before me? If he knew me by name, he would know I was sailing on his ship, for as purser, he would have seen my name on the passenger list. Didn't he care if I recognized the gardener in the purser? Or did he assume that common sense would refuse to associate the obviously educated purser, in trim blue and gold, with the ragged, unlettered gardener, seen only for a few moments?

And what did he gain by pretending to be illiterate? A letter in my handwriting. What use was that?

The dance music was chopped off in the middle of a bar. Abrupt silence drew every eye to the radio.

A voice that gave a crisp, English value to vowels most Americans slur, came out of the little box.

"This is Station Ay Bee Zed, Saint Andrew, Quisqueya. We interrupt this programme for a news bulletin. Mr. Rupert Lord, an American citizen, spending a few months at his home in Quisqueya, died at eight o'clock tonight of injuries received in a riding accident three days ago. The authorities have been unable to find his wife in order to notify her of his death. Anyone listening to this broadcast who knows the whereabouts of Mrs. Rupert Lord at the present time is requested to inform the Police Commissioner of Saint Andrew, Quisqueya, immediately."

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN I CLIMBED the ladder to the hurricane deck, I was glad that I had stopped in my cabin for a hooded raincoat. The wild wind slapped rain against face and legs.

I leaned against the wind as I walked around the deck, looking under every lifeboat, behind every stanchion. There was no one else. I paused at the rail, holding it tightly to steady my feet against the lurch of the ship.

Suddenly Tony spoke at my elbow.

"Have you no caution? At all? Standing so close to the rail, alone, on a roofless deck, in a dark stormy night? You didn't even hear me come up!"

I stepped back. "Sorry. I'd forgotten all that."

"Hit you hard. Didn't it?"

I turned to look at him. He had pulled up his raincoat collar but his head was bared to the gale. Raindrops ran down his cheeks like tears and his damp hair was curling into little ringlets.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Rupert."

"How do you know?"

"You look pretty grim."

I tried to pull myself together.

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"Rupert and I were old friends. I can't remember when I didn't know him. I remember his taking me to Harvard Class Day when I was eighteen. Now..."

Tony brought me down to earth again. "Your parents had some sort of feud with Rupert's parents, didn't they?"

"One of those silly family quarrels," I answered. "My father borrowed money from Rupert's father. There was a verbal understanding that it would be repaid out of my father's share of my grandfather's estate. When grandfather died, Rupert's father was the executor. He claimed the estate had dwindled so that there was not even enough money left to cover my father's debt, let alone repay the debt and leave something over, as my father expected. Father claimed that Rupert's father had deliberately squandered the estate during grandfather's last illness. That Rupert's father wanted to keep my father in debt because they had quarreled over something else—politics, I think. No one cared to take the matter to court, but the two families had nothing more to do with each other—until I happened to run into Rupert in Washington during the war. Our parents were all dead by that time. The whole thing seemed so far away we laughed at it."

I suspected that Tony was not listening. His next remark proved that his thoughts were far away. "What do you suppose can have happened to Amanda?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid I don't care."

"Do you still think Rupert's accident was—accident?"

I shivered, not entirely with dampness. "Who knows?"

"You said Rupert was alone when it happened," went on Tony, in a hushed voice. "He was found unconscious with a broken leg and a wound in his head. That must have been a fracture, after all, or he wouldn't have died. Suppose it wasn't the horse's hoof that struck him? Suppose he was knocked down and left for dead? Or suppose someone tampered deliberately with his saddle girth and hoped for the worst? That might be why he wouldn't dismiss the groom. He had reason to suspect someone else was responsible. Perhaps it all had something to do with this sum of money from the very beginning."

"So I'm beginning to realize. Tony, do you know the real reason I tried to borrow cash from you when the purser took up that collection? My wallet is gone. And most of my traveler's checks."

"Gone?" He looked at me stupidly.

"Stolen, I believe."

Tony laughed. "Funny to think of a thief taking your wallet and checks. Of course he had no idea you were carrying a package of a hundred grand!"

"Only he did," I sighed. "That's why he stole my wallet."

Tony struggled to assimilate this. "You mean he suspected you had Rupert's money, but he wasn't sure and he didn't know where it was. So he stole your own money, hoping you would have to use Rupert's sooner or

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later for cash. The minute you started flourishing a hundred-dollar bill, he'd know for certain that you had Rupert's wad. You might even show him where you were keeping it, if he watched you closely enough to see where you went before you produced a second bill. I suppose he could hasten the process by stealing the first one or tricking you into spending it, say, in a bridge game."

"That's what I think."

"But how could he suspect you had the money in the first place?"

"Any of the passengers or crew may know about it now. I told you about the ventilator in my cabin. Anyone who happened to be passing in the corridor when we were talking this afternoon could have overheard everything we said."

"Golly! You're sure?"

"Quite sure. I heard the two people quarreling in the corridor just after you left me in the cabin. Their voices came through the ventilator clearly even though they were whispering.

"They didn't know I could hear them," I went on. "The woman asked the man if he were sure they couldn't be overheard and he said yes. So neither of them had been listening to us. But someone else must have done so before the two I heard got there. For I'm sure someone suspects I have Rupert's money. It can't be coincidence that my wallet vanished."

"Do you think it's one of the passengers? Or the crew?"

"Could be either. Could be anyone. Miss Crespi looks as if she needed money. So does Sherwood. How long have you known him?"

"Just a few weeks. The way you know any man you meet hanging around hotel bars in Saint Andrew. No knowing who or what he is. He doesn't say—as you probably noticed ... Why didn't you give the money to the purser?"

"Because I trust the purser less than anyone else on board. I saw him in the grounds of Rupert's house in Quisqueya a few hours before we sailed. Only he wasn't dressed like a purser then. He was dressed like a gardener," I went on. "He had shears. He was clipping a hedge."

"Of all extraordinary ... ! I say, he might have overheard something about the money out there."

"That makes two possible eavesdroppers," I mused. "The purser at the Lords', or someone else in the corridor outside my cabin." I laughed without mirth. "Rumor travels fast. Perhaps everybody on board knows I have the money by this time."

"There's only one thing for you to do," Tony said.

"What?"

"Turn the money over to me."

I looked at Tony. "Thanks." I smiled at him.

"Then you will?" He was eager.

"Of course not."

"But ..."

I laughed. "Do you really think I'd let you? For me? You, with your whole life before you? I'm sorry you know anything about this. I would never have told you, if you hadn't walked into my cabin when the money was scattered all over the place."

"Hang it, you can't go around for

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three more days with a hundred thousand bucks loose in your handbag! Not when so many people may suspect it's there."

"It's not in my bag now."

Tony looked at the white pigskin pouch hanging from its strap across my shoulder—limp, and obviously empty. His jaw sagged. "Where is it?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

I had the minor satisfaction of seeing that I had finally shaken Tony out of his airy complacency. Even his normally round, pink face looked pale and almost pinched in the dim light as he said slowly: "Why, you—you idiot! You must tell me! How can I help you otherwise?"

I shook my head. "You'd give it away unconsciously."

"My dear, old girl, be reasonable!"

"Don't you see this is the only safe play?" I argued. "If no one but me knows where the money is, there's a chance nothing will happen to either of us. You're out of it and the thief won't kill me because he won't be able to find the money by himself and he won't dare to kill the only person who can tell him where it is. All he can do is watch me and try to make me give away the hiding place inadvertently."

"How do you know he won't find it searching by himself? If he did, we'd both be in greater danger than ever!"

"No one could find it, searching alone and surreptitiously. Even an official search might not discover it. Not where I've hidden it."

"How can you be so sure?"

We might have kept this up for some time. But just then, through the howl of sea and wind, there came another sound—a shriek of human fear.

CHAPTER SIX

We ran to the top of the ladder. The deck below was empty in the light from the portholes.

"Come on!" Tony ran down the ladder. I followed. He pulled open a door to the upper lounge, cutting a wide swath of light across the shadowy deck.

Tony was muttering to himself: "Where is everybody?"

The upper lounge was lighted and empty.

Tony ran to the head of the main companionway. I was close behind. Three steps below crouched one of the Hindu messmen from Quisqueya. His brown face had a violent tinge. He pointed down the stair.

Tony started down the steps. Again I followed. From the landing we could see the lower lounge. It, too, was lighted and silent now. But not empty.

Joan Harley stood at the foot of the stair, rigid as the newel post gripped in one claw-like hand. Her garnet-red lips looked almost purple against the ghastly pallor of her face. Livia Crespi sat on a wall bench below a row of portholes, one hand flat on the upholstered seat beside her, bracing her arm at full length. With

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each gusty breath her round breasts strained against the low-cut neckline of her skimpy dress.

Tony went on down the lower flight. He halted on the last step so abruptly that I almost collided with him.

"What . . . ?" I began.

Then I saw it, too. On the floor, about twelve feet from us.

It was wickedly beautiful. About five feet long, scaly and slender, the bright red-gold of newly minted copper dappled with harlequin splashes of soot-black.

It lay there in lazy loops, its whiplash tail extruding from the lowest coil. Its blunt, shallow head lifted buoyantly and swayed on the pliant neck, as if keeping time to inaudible music.

Light and languid as a feather, its head sank to the floor. It stretched its neck luxuriously. A ripple passed down its body, the coils straightened into a sinuous length. It flowed toward us, a thin stream of molten copper moving silently as a shadow.

"Stand perfectly still."

I started at the sound of that unexpected voice from the doorway. Abruptly the snake was still.

Harley came through the doorway holding a long rod with a metal hook screwed to one end. Sherwood, the Captain and the purser came after him, carrying a sack of heavy burlap by its drawing strings. Each string was so long that the three men could hold the sack open while remaining at a distance of several feet.

Harley was no longer the voluble enthusiast. Even his voice seemed different—calm and authoritative.

"A scream or sudden motion would be — regrettable," he said quietly. "Crying, moving things are either prey or enemies. Please don't move or speak till this is over."

He edged toward the snake, step by step. He slid his hook under the snake's middle and lifted it. The copper-bright thing flashed, too quickly for the eye to follow. Now it was coiled around the rod like the snakes Hermes carries on his staff.

A sudden lurch of the ship tilted the rod vertically. The glittering coils bunched and slid off the rod to the floor. We were back where we had started.

Harley's brow wrinkled but his hand remained steady. Again the hook slipped under the snake's middle.

Harley took a step nearer. The snake uncoiled and moved away from him in a fluent shudder. Harley followed, matching his tempo to the snake's—quick when it was quick, measured when it was measured, still when it was still.

Finally he lifted the snake on the rod. Perhaps the thing itself was tired of play. For now it dangled, limp and quiescent. Harley took one step. And another. He balanced the snake above the sack. Its neck writhed. It slapped a coil around the rod. Harley tilted the rod vertically. The coil rolled off the rod into the sack. Half the body dangled outside. Harley touched the snake's middle lightly with the tip of his hook. The scaly skin shrank from contact with a shiver that sent the rest of the body into the sack. Ex-

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cept the tail. Harley nodded to the three men holding the drawing strings. They pulled tight. As the taut string bit into the tail, it vanished with a flip that seemed impudent, almost derisive. Harley picked up the lumpy sack. The lumps moved unpleasantly.

Seven voices spoke all at once. Everyone was making up for those awful minutes of enforced stillness. And they all had plenty to say.

The Captain intervened. "Let's take a look at that snake box of yours, Dr. Harley."

Still carrying the lumpy sack, Harley moved toward the companionway. The rest of us followed, keeping our distance from the sack.

"Your cabin's up on A deck?" Sherwood looked keenly at Harley. "Can snakes walk downstairs?"

Harley glanced up at the balustrade around the stairwell. "She could have fallen below when the ship lurched. I understand she was first seen in one of the cabins. A messman was turning down beds for the night. He opened a cabin door and saw her on the floor. He screamed and ran away, leaving the door open. Of course his scream frightened her and she fled into the corridor."

"And of course the cabin door had been shut by the snake?" Sherwood's voice was deceptively mild.

"The messman was frightened," retorted Harley. "He may have been mistaken about the door being latched. It may have been ajar."

Harley led the way down the corridor to his cabin—a double room with an adjoining bath.

"One moment," Sherwood's voice halted us as we were all crowding into the cabin. "In whose cabin was the snake found?"

Even Harley paused at that question. "I don't know," he said shortly. "Ask the messman."

It happened that I was the first to enter the bathroom, where the snake box was kept; Livia Crespi followed close on my heels. A strange musty smell sickened me. It came from a green wooden box lashed with rope to a drainpipe on the ceiling. There was an opening barred with wire mesh in the side facing me. Something inside waddled up to the mesh on hind legs, trailing wings awkwardly. A nightmare face looked out through the mesh—round, vicious eyes, flat nose, small mean mouth. The upper lip lifted in defiance. The jaw bristled with teeth, narrow and sharp as ivory needles—the scalpels of "The Surgeon" of Quisqueya. I began to feel reluctant sympathy for Joan Harley.

"Don't be frightened!"

For one fatuous moment, I thought Harley was speaking to me. Then I saw him looking earnestly at the bat.

"Dracula is sensitive to strangers. I hope he'll get over his shyness in captivity."

"What box was that snake in?" demanded the Captain.

"This one."

All eyes followed Harley's gesture to another wooden box on the floor between the end of the bathtub and the wall. The Captain hauled the box into the middle of the floor. The lid was bumpy and there was an open

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slit between lid and box at one end. It looked as if the wood had warped, forcing the nails up and raising the lid above the edge of the box for a space of five or six inches at one end. The gap was wide enough to reveal a thick layer of straw at the bottom of the box. No wonder the snake had escaped!

The captain's big red-knuckled hand reached out and plucked something from the gaping lid. His bushy yellow brows contracted. "Dr. Harley, you swore to me the lid was screwed down, so it couldn't wrench open, even if the wood did warp."

Harley answered blankly. "It was screwed down. I gave particular instructions to my native boys to use screws. I even supervised them while they drilled screwholes at the four corners of the lid with an electric drill."

"Then where did this come from?" The Captain held out one hand. On his broad, calloused palm lay a new, shiny three-inch nail . . .

Harley shook his head slowly. "I—I have no idea. . . ."

We were a pretty subdued lot when we dispersed to our cabins. Livia Crespi was still beside me as I stepped into the corridor. "Going to sleep tonight? After that?" I asked her.

"I'll lock my door and take sleeping tablets," she answered. "I usually do. I've had insomnia for years."

That was midnight — nearly six hours ago.

I have been typing this script ever since.

For now I believe I know why the purser wanted that letter in my handwriting.

You remember there was one passage he took pains to dictate word for word? And only one passage? The passage that was on a second sheet of paper all by itself. Do you recall how that passage went? Like this:

I cannot stand our separation any longer. This seems to be the only way out. I'm sorry if it causes trouble.

Leslie Dawson.

Now do you understand?

Detached from the first page, that second page reads like a suicide note.

He plāns to murder me. And he used the simple device of pretending illiteracy to obtain a suicide note in my own handwriting.

There is no salutation on that second page, but a suicide note does not need one. He could not ask me plausibly to write a whole letter without a salutation. Neither could he dictate to me the sort of salutation I would use to a friend or a member of my family, if I were actually writing a suicide note myself. But he could plan the letter he did dictate so that its second page would read like a suicide note without any salutation at all.

The signature? I realized now that "Leslie Dawson" is probably not the purser's real name. Everyone on board calls him "Henriquez Mendoza." I suppose "Leslie Dawson" was a fictitious name, chosen at random. He could hardly have asked me to write an unsigned letter for him without exciting suspicion. And, of course, he can cut off the signature later. The fact that the letter is in my own handwriting would be enough to

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identify it as mine, if it were found beside my dead body.

He rejected the phrase I suggested for the end of the letter—*with all my love*—because that doesn't sound like a suicide note. Since he is literate, he must have seen me write a similar phrase against his wishes—*you know I love you.* It happens that this particular phrase does sound like a suicide note. But if it hadn't, he could have cut it off when he cut off the signature.

He had to come to the Lords' house himself to get this letter in my writing. If he'd sent an agent to get it, the agent might have blackmailed him or betrayed him after I was dead. He couldn't risk that. He preferred to risk my recognizing the illiterate gardener as the purser.

But why should this man, whom I never even saw before yesterday, want to kill me and go to such trouble to do so?

It must have something to do with Rupert and the money. Rupert has traveled on this ship. The purser would know Rupert's habit of traveling with fairly large sums in cash. No doubt Rupert has asked Mendoza to keep such sums in the ship's safe on several voyages.

Mendoza may have visited the Lords' house more than once in his guise of gardener or farmer, taking care to keep out of Rupert's sight. This last time the *Santa Cristina* was in port at Saint Andrew for three days. Mendoza may have overheard a great deal outside the open French windows of that ground-floor bedroom Rupert used after his accident. Mendoza may know more about that "accident" than anyone else. Mendoza may have heard what Rupert said when he gave me the manila envelope, Mendoza may have suspected what it contained . . .

Does this explain why the snake was turned loose tonight? If it was turned loose . . . No one seems to know the truth about that. Chandra Das, the messman who gave the alarm, says he found it in Tony's cabin. But he's no longer sure the door was latched when he entered the cabin; now he says it may have been ajar . . .

Writing down these events in sequence has clarified their pattern in my own mind.

I've planned it so the very existence of this script in the hands of the police should save my life. I've already marked the first page: *only to be read in the event of my death by violence.* I shall seal it in an envelope with the same inscription and enclose that envelope in another, addressed to you, which I shall drop in the mailbag tomorrow morning. And I shall tell everyone on board that I have written such an account of the last few days and that it is already in the hands of the police, who will read it only if I die. Then, if there is a potential murderer among these people, he will know that I cannot be silenced by killing. That even if I die, this script will speak for me after my death. That should save my life.

Perhaps I should explain why no one searching alone and surreptitiously can ever find the money where I have hidden it.

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As you may have guessed already, I hid the money in

Here, in mid-sentence, ends the typescript that began so curiously with the admonition: the following pages are to be read only in the event of my death by violence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ROOM WAS SMALL and shady. Beyond the open window an empty patio baked in the white-hot sun.

The man at the window was born to such a climate, slender and swarthy, with an olive skin that the sun could not redden or brown. He had the small, shapely head, the dark liquid eye and the thin, wide nostril of an Arab stallion. He had something, too, of the stallion's high temper and hair-trigger nerves. Yet ordinarily he moved and spoke with a composure almost Oriental. He was of pure Spanish stock—Miguel Urizar, Captain of Municipal Police at Puerta Vieja.

"Well?" The other man, lolling in the single armchair, spoke in English. He was the Goth undiluted—ice-blue eyes, hair pale as winter sunshine, features rugged as if hacked from some hard substance that deflected every stroke of the chisel. His nose jutted, his long chin was solid as rock. The southern sun was unkind to his complexion, bleaching his hair still whiter, broiling his skin to a fiery red.

"Have you read it?"

"Yes." Urizar crossed the room to his desk. "A remarkable document, Lars." He read aloud. *"To the Commissioner of Police, in Puerta Vieja, Santa Teresa: The following pages are to be read only in the event of my death by violence. . . .* As I am chief of police here and you have invited me to read this script, I make the obvious deduction: the author has died by violence. Right?"

"I don't know." Lindstrom hesitated.

"You don't know?" Urizar's brows arched. "You mean you don't know whether she's alive or dead? Or you don't know whether her death was natural or violent?"

"One of the women passengers died last night," said Lindstrom doggedly. "That's the one thing I really do know. Her death was violent, but I do not know whether it was accident, suicide or murder. And I do not know whether she was the author of this script or not."

Urizar's eyelids drooped derisively. "Yet you read the script? In spite of the injunction that it should be read only in the event of the author's death by violence?"

"You think I was wrong?" Lindstrom answered seriously. He was not a man to joke about scruples. "Wait a minute, Miguel. It happened like this: First, we find the dead body—a woman passenger. I was going to log it as 'regrettable accident.' Second, the chief engineer says one of the two big ventilators is choked this morning and sends a sailor to clean it out. The sailor comes to me with this

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script he found inside. It was the thing blocking the ventilator. On the first page it says: *to be read only in the event of my death by violence.* There's no name on the script and we've just had a death by violence. So I think the dead woman wrote this and I read it. Wouldn't you have done the same thing?"

"Probably. And then?"

"Well, then, there are things in the script and things about the dead woman that don't match each other."

"Then," said Urizar, "You think one woman wrote the script because she was afraid of being murdered and then an entirely different woman was murdered?"

"Looks that way."

"Why? Was the one killed mistaken for the other?"

"I don't know. The whole thing is baffling."

"So you want to dump it in my lap!" Urizar dropped into the swivel chair behind his desk. "The script is unsigned. The author may not care to acknowledge authorship now. Most people don't care to involve themselves in a murder case, if they can help it."

"I have a pretty clear idea who the author is," retorted Lindstrom.

"Can you prove it?"

"There were only three women passengers this voyage—Mrs. Harley, whom I had met on other voyages, and two strangers. According to the passenger list they were named Livia Crespi and Nina Keyes. The script mentions both Mrs. Harley and Miss Crespi by name, in the third person. So—the author must be Nina Keyes."

"Have you questioned her?"

"No. That's a job for a professional. Your job."

"She ends abruptly in mid-sentence," went on Urizar. "A vitally important sentence when she is just about to tell us where she has hidden the money. What happened to her at that point?"

Lindstrom grunted. "How should I know? Evidently something—or someone—interrupted her. Before she had a chance to finish the script."

Urizar's glance followed the lacy shadow of the iron window-grille that dappled the stone floor. "When did you find the body?"

"I didn't. A steward found her at six this morning, just before we docked here, in Puerta Vieja."

"Your first port of call after Saint Andrew?"

"Yes."

Urizar's eyes came back to Lindstrom. "Then the murder took place at sea and the murderer is someone aboard your ship?"

"If it is murder."

"You're not sure?"

Lindstrom sighed. "She was found at the foot of the main companionway. Last night was rough. She could have fallen accidently."

"Rupert Lord's death was supposed to be an accident, too," murmured Urizar.

Lindstrom nodded. "Miguel, I want you to handle this yourself. The Line will be grateful if you are—discreet."

"And if I sailed with you . . . ?"

"No one need know you are a police officer. You would be just another

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passenger. You'd be living at close quarters with the only people involved in the case and none of them would be on guard. You'd have a real chance to uncover the murderer between here and New York."

"That would be interesting," returned Urizar. "But highly irregular. Think of the extradition proceedings—the forms to be filled out in quintuplet!"

"O.K., Miguel." Lindstrom pulled himself to his feet, picked up the typescript. "I'll give this to your deputy."

"Just a moment." Urizar trailed his visitor to the doorway. "Was it the fall that killed this woman?"

Lindstrom's bleak eyes twinkled frostily. "That's hard to say. Better start packing, if you're sailing this afternoon."

Urizar's face remained smooth, expressionless—a mask carved in ivory. But his eyes glinted dangerously. "What did you say her name was? Livia Crespi?"

Lindstrom paused in the doorway. "Her name on the passenger list? Or the name on her passport?"

There was a moment of silence. "You old devil!" Under his breath, Urizar said something more impolite in Spanish. "What was her name on the passenger list?"

"Livia Crespi."

"And the name on her passport?"

Lindstrom answered soberly. "Leslie Dawson."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CORRIDOR SMELLED DAMPLY of whitewash. In the anteroom, a uniformed sergeant lounged beside the door to the street.

"Sergento!" Urizar's voice snapped.

The sergeant sprang to attention. "Yes, *Señor Capitan?*"

"Tell the Sergeant Fernandez to meet me aboard the *Santa Cristina* at the United Citrus Company's pier. And the *Señor* Doctor Burano."

Lindstrom followed Urizar through the doorway into blazing sunshine. They passed into the shade of a columned arcade lined with shops.

"No wonder you did not mistake the dead woman for the author of the script!" said Urizar. "If those two were one and the same woman, she would have recognized her own name 'Leslie Dawson' when Mendoza asked her to sign the letter he dictated with that name. Always providing that the dead woman's real name is 'Leslie Dawson'."

"Travelers give false names to passenger lists quite commonly for various reasons," put in Lindstrom. "It would be more risky to travel with a false passport. So her name's more likely to be Leslie Dawson than Livia Crespi."

"You think so?" Urizar's tone indicated that he did not. "The passport is our only evidence that the dead woman was named Leslie Dawson. It could be a forged passport. Or it could be a real passport issued to some other person named Leslie Dawson and then planted on the dead Livia Crespi in order to substantiate

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the fake suicide note signed 'Leslie Dawson'."

"Only there was no fake suicide note to substantiate," remarked Lindstrom: "The letter signed Leslie Dawson was not used for that purpose. I don't see how it could have been planned for that purpose since it wasn't in the dead woman's handwriting."

"Whatever the object of that letter, the recurrence of the name Leslie Dawson establishes some link between the dead Livia Crespi and this other woman, Nina Keyes, who wrote the script," insisted Urizar. "What does this purser of yours, Mendoza, say about it? Or haven't you questioned him either?"

"I told you I hadn't questioned anyone," retorted Lindstrom with a touch of impatience.

"What did you do with the money?"

"What money?"

Urizar frowned impatiently. "Rupert Lord's money. This famous hundred thousand in cash."

"So far the script itself is the only evidence that there was a hundred thousand in cash."

Astonishment brought Urizar to a halt. "What are you hinting?"

"Not hinting. Just wondering. If that money ever existed at all."

"Then you believe the whole script may be a tissue of lies?"

"Possibly."

"Written for what purpose?"

"I don't know."

Eyes narrowed, Urizar resumed his walk. "I disagree. It would be most foolish to compose a lie running to eighty pages if you had anything to conceal. Even a small lie betrays itself by its own inconsistencies, internal and external. Such a mammoth lie would be a mass of inconsistencies. And all lies expose secrets in the liar's mind by the form his invention takes. The script, as a whole, has the unmistakable ring of truth to me, though I realize that any part of it may be false. Nothing is more revealing of the artist. Even if there were no other indication of the author's sex in this script, I would deduce that she was female from the fact that the script describes men at such length while it pays so little attention to the three women mentioned. And that's only one of many things this script suggests about its author — unconsciously."

"What are some of the others?"

"She was naïve about business matters. Otherwise she would never have accepted so easily the idea that Rupert Lord wanted his money in cash because he had quarreled with his partner."

"Tony Brooke assumed the same thing."

"Brooke seems naïve too. But, to a policeman, a large sum in cash suggests many possibilities." Urizar's smile was essentially Latin, fine-edged and ironic. "The script says Lord was 'ruthless' in business—a customary euphemism for unscrupulous. Cash is usually preferred in blackmail or black-market transactions. And haven't North American business men a pastime called Beating the Income Tax," said Urizar. "And then there's inheritance tax. One North American

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banker explained that to me. He said: 'To a business man, death is a serious matter. He prepares himself for death just as soberly as if it were an important business deal.'"

Lindstrom laughed. "To wage-slaves like us, death is just one great big joke. . . . Does it matter what Rupert Lord's cash was for?"

"Yes. If that money was intended for some illegal purpose, Nina Keyes is in greater danger than she realized for all sorts of criminal types might have a stake in that game."

"You think Lord gave the envelope containing money to Nina Keyes purposely? Without telling her what was inside?"

"Why not?" Urizar said it with assurance. "Particularly if the money was intended for something illegal."

"I call it a dirty trick," returned Lindstrom. "A trick that might have cost the girl her life."

Once on board the ship Lindstrom led the way to the lounge, and paused at a balustrade around a stairwell—obviously the main companionway. Beside him, Urizar looked down to the foot of the great stair. The body of a woman lay there in a nightgown of thin, creamy slik.

"It was Chandra Das, a messman from Quisqueya, who found her," explained Lindstrom. "Lying exactly as you see her now. Chandra Das cried out in horror. At his cry, something moved down there beside the body."

"Something long and sinuous?"

"Yes. The bushmaster again. How did you know?"

"You said 'something' moved—not 'someone'."

"The snake's body was coiled around her neck, like a collar," resumed Lindstrom. "The flat head lay on her breast. Any sort of investigation had to wait until Dr. Harley recaptured the snake. No one knew when she had been bitten. The snake might have had time to secrete fresh venom. Nothing else has been touched since."

"And the snake?"

"Locked in a section of the hold now, the lid of its box screwed down by my own carpenter."

Urizar led the way below. With all doors and windows shut the lower lounge was twilit. Lindstrom switched on electric lights. Urizar knelt beside the body.

Livia Crespi's skin was the same creamy tinge as her gown. Insertions of cobweb lace lay lightly across her bosom, revealing the delicate transition from ivory to rose at the tip of her breasts. Her body was voluptuously round and smooth, tapering to slenderness at neck and wrist and ankle. Her feet were bare; like her hands, slender and childlike. She had one of those tiny mouths with full lips that seem always pouting. In death, the short upper lip curled back and the full lower lip dropped, revealing small, even teeth like *perles fines*. There was only a trace of lipstick on the mouth. The brows were unplucked, thick and black. Long black hair flowed around her body, falling below her waist. The nightgown was loose to the waist but taut and swirled sidewise across the hips, for she had fallen in a position that pushed its hem up to her knees.

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Urizar's deliberate gaze appraised these details and fastened with closer attention on the left arm. Just above the elbow the arm had swollen and turned an angry red.

"You have no idea what she was doing up there?" he said. "Barefoot, in her nightgown?"

"I think she was running from the snake," suggested Lindstrom. "Had she left her cabin for any other reason she would almost certainly have worn slippers and dressing gown. Something in her cabin must have frightened her out of her wits. That would be the snake."

"So she runs outside in her nightgown, just as she is," added Urizar. "And falls over the balustrade. Or someone pushes her down the stair ..."

"Companionway," corrected Lindstrom automatically. "But there's one odd thing: no one seems to have heard her scream."

"Not even when the snake struck?" Urizar frowned. "The doctors will have to decide whether the fall or the snake-bite killed her. Morally, it would be murder either way—if the snake was placed in her cabin deliberately. For that was the cause of both fall and snake-bite."

"How can anyone prove the snake was placed in her cabin deliberately?" objected Lindstrom. "It's possible the snake got loose accidentally. That happened once before."

"When the lid was nailed down," amended Urizar. "Wasn't it screwed down the second time?"

"Of course."

"Then the snake could not possibly have got out by itself the second time. That makes it murder."

"I know, but ..." Lindstrom shook his head. "Would any murderer use a weapon as dangerous and unpredictable as a venomous snake? It might have turned on the murderer himself. He couldn't be sure it would kill Livia Crespi. Or Leslie Dawson, if that's her real name ..."

Lindstrom's cold eyes surveyed the pearly contours with a certain Nordic austerity. "Good-looking girl on the plump side."

"Voice?"

"Contralto."

"It would be. Accent?"

"North American, Eastern seaboard, probably New York."

"Walk? Manner?"

Lindstrom hesitated. "She walked like the girls on the waterfront in Puerta Vieja."

Urizar smiled crookedly. "She looks the way romantic painters imagine a harlot should look. If she were West Indian, she would be the cherished mistress of some rich, old Hindu or Chinese in Trinidad or ..."

"But she wasn't West Indian," objected Lindstrom practically.

"How do you know?" returned Urizar.

"She had an American passport."

"Made out to Leslie Dawson? That proves nothing. Even if the passport is genuine and she was an American citizen, she may have come from the West Indies originally. That first name 'Leslie' sounds like the British West Indies. Did you learn anything about her that you haven't told me?"

"No. Except that her suitcase was

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brought to the ship by one of Rupert Lord's chauffeurs."

"She was a house guest there?"

"I don't believe so. Nina Keyes, who was a house guest, seems to write of Livia Crespi as a stranger, in the script. But her suitcase did come from the Lords' house. That's one reason I thought she was the author of the script when I read those first few pages, that tell about the author staying with the Lords. Then as I read on and came to the place where Livia Crespi is named and described I saw that she couldn't be the author and . . ."

The door to the upper lounge opened. A pillar of sunlight slanted down the stairwell. A uniformed police sergeant stepped across the high threshold followed by a man in plain clothes, carrying a physician's bag.

Urizar murmured polite Spanish greetings to the doctor and introduced Lindstrom. "I shall be in the Captain's cabin when you have finished, *señor*."

Urizar turned back to Lindstrom. "Lars, let me have that script a moment." His eyes were intent as he leafed through the pages. He paused. "I thought so. That settles it."

"What now?" Lindstrom was watching him closely.

Urizar refolded the script and thrust it in his pocket. "I had almost forgotten. Twice in the script it states plainly that the author has short hair." He turned to gaze at the veil of long black hair, swirling below the dead woman's hips.

"Then who was she?" ruminated Urizar. "Why was she killed? And what was her connection with that other woman who did write the script?"

"Only one way to find out." Lindstrom called up the stairwell, "Olsen! My compliments to Miss Nina Keyes and will she please come to my cabin immediately?"

CHAPTER NINE

SHE PAUSED IN THE DOORWAY, looking from one man to the other. "Captain Lindstrom?"

Dark hair, straight and burnished as silk floss, fitted her head neatly as a skullcap, framing a lean oval face. There was character in the structure of the resolute chin, the high-bridged nose and the prominent cheekbones. The brows were slightly thicker than fashionable, but shapely and dark—two straight lines that heightened the wide opposing curves of eyelids and clear brown eyes.

Her dark gingham dress was cut with a severity that brought out the lines of an extremely slim figure, erect and supple as a willow wand.

Urizar had an impression that she was one of the few women with enough character and natural good looks to scorn the more obvious feminine frivolities successfully. He judged her to be twenty-eight or thirty. There were no wrinkles or gray hairs yet, but there was an air of competent independence that comes only with experience.

Lindstrom was saying: "This is

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Captain Urizar of the Municipal Police in Puerta Vieja. Won't you sit down, Miss Keyes?"

She relaxed in the armchair, completely at ease. Her wandering glance passed the porthole, came to rest on Lindstrom's desk. Scattered on the blotter were two wallets and a pile of typescript. Swiftly she rose to look at them more closely. "That's mine. The script. And that's my wallet. The black one. Where did you find them?"

"The script was in a ventilator on A deck, portside, aft," answered Lindstrom. "The wallet was among the effects of the dead woman."

"So it was you—thank God!" Relief flooded her face. "That explains everything. Except the wallet."

"Does it?" Lindstrom looked dubious.

"Please sit down, Miss Keyes," said Urizar. He was leaning against the wall, sleepy-eyed, smoke trailing from the inevitable cigarette in his nicotined fingertips. "We have both read your script."

"You—read it?" She sank back in her chair. "But the instructions on the first page . . ."

"Were to read it only in the event of your death?" he interrupted. "That's why Lindstrom read it."

It took a moment for this to sink in. "You mean . . . ?"

"He thought the author was dead, at first. He thought she and Livia Crespi were the same person. By the time he realized his mistake, he was too interested to stop reading. The script was unsigned. Its author was obviously a woman passenger aboard this ship who had been staying with the Lords in Quisqueya. And who expected to die by violence. A woman passenger whose luggage was brought on board by the Lords' chauffeur did die by violence. In the first flush of that discovery Lindstrom assumed that dead woman was the author of the script."

"But I was the only house guest at the Lords'," protested Nina. "There was no Livia Crespi there. I never saw her or even heard her name before I came on board."

"But you did hear something about another name at the Lords'," said Lindstrom. "The name Leslie Dawson."

Nina's red lips parted breathlessly. "Leslie Dawson . . ." she repeated numbly. "Then . . . there really was a Leslie Dawson. And now she is dead . . . I don't understand."

"Neither do we," said Urizar, wryly. "Perhaps you can help us. Could you have seen Leslie Dawson briefly once or twice before?"

"I suppose that's possible," admitted Nina. "Only I'm sure she wasn't a guest at the Lords' while I was there. I wouldn't—I couldn't have forgotten that so soon. The whole idea is absurd."

"Of course," agreed Urizar equably. "But suppose she was at the Lords' house in some other capacity? If she were a self-effacing dependent—a chambermaid, for instance, or the wife of a manservant. And that would explain why the Lords' chauffeur brought her suitcase to the ship."

Nina smiled for the first time—an appealing flash of clean white teeth

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in a red-lipped, sun-browned face. "You have read my poor little script carefully, Captain Urizar!"

"Yes," answered Urizar gravely. "You see it's the only evidence we have that Leslie Dawson's death was not an accident."

"Oh . . ." Nina's smile was gone as quickly as it had come. "I thought . . . One of the stewards said she was bitten by Dr. Harley's snake. Surely that must be an accident?"

"We don't know. We're trying to find out."

"But no one would commit suicide by snake bite!"

"We have not been thinking of suicide." Urizar's tapered fingers turned the pages of the script idly. "We have been thinking of murder."

"Why?" asked Nina, in a small voice.

"Because we have learned from your script that anyone and everyone on board this ship had a potential motive for murder. The universal motive that regards not age, sex, race, creed or previous conditions of servitude. Money."

"Miss Keyes," interrupted Lindstrom. "I'm going to suggest that you put that money in one of the banks at Puerta Vieja."

"That money? I don't understand." The straight brows met in a frown.

Lindstrom flushed. "I don't blame you for hesitating to trust me with the secret while we were at sea. But now I do know the secret—thanks to the script—and we're in port, so—everything is different. You can deposit the money in a bank here. In Mrs. Lord's name, if you don't want to use your own. Mr. Brooke was right. It's too big a secret for a little girl like you to carry alone. One woman has died already. There's no knowing what might happen next. Where is the money now?"

"I agree with Lindstrom, Miss Keyes," said Urizar. "The sooner that money is in a bank, the better for all of us. If you'll let us have the package now . . ."

Nina cut him short. "If *I* will let you have the package? Now?" She turned bewildered eyes from one to the other. "But don't *you* know where the money is?"

"Of course not!" exclaimed Lindstrom.

"But you said you found my script in the ventilator—on A deck, portside, aft."

"So we did."

"But that's where I hid the money. When you told me you had found my script there I thought, of course, that it was you who had taken the money. For it isn't where I left it in the ventilator. I looked this morning and it was gone."

"Do you mean to say you have no idea where the money is now?" demanded Lindstrom.

"None whatever—if you and Captain Urizar haven't got it."

Urizar spoke. "Let's get this straight. Did you hide the money and the script in the ventilator at the same time?"

"Of course not. Why on earth should I hide the script? I wanted to mail it to you. That's why I wrote it."

"Then how did it get into the ventilator?"

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"I don't know." Nina took a cigarette from the pigskin pouch. "It took me all night to type that script," she said when the cigarette was drawing. "Until about six this morning. I was in the middle of a sentence when I heard the most fearful scream. Of course I stopped typing and ran into the corridor. Voices were coming from the main companionway. I hurried down there and—well, you know what I saw. The deck steward had just found Livia—I mean Leslie Dawson—and the snake. It was the deck steward who had screamed. I knew only one person who could handle the situation. I went back to the Harleys' cabin and knocked on the door. Dr. Harley came out and took charge immediately, just as he had the night before. He asked me to rouse Tony and Sherwood and I did. I watched from the head of the stair until they recaptured the snake. Just then Mrs. Harley came along and burst into tears when she saw the dead body. I took her back to her cabin and stayed with her about twenty minutes. Then I went to my own cabin and—the script was gone.

"Now you see why it wasn't signed. Any one of the passengers could have taken it. I had no idea who took the script or why. But the fact that it had disappeared was disturbing. Had someone been listening to the clatter of my typewriter all night? Waiting for a chance to get into the cabin and see what I was writing?

"That set me thinking. If I was being watched so closely someone might have seen me slip the package of money into the ventilator. I simply had to make sure the money was still where I had left it. As soon as the corridor was clear I went on A deck. There was no one else there at the moment. I had to take a chance that no one would come there for the next few moments. I reached inside the ventilator and—the package was gone. Then I was really frightened . . ." She turned to Lindstrom. "You remember my sending a steward to ask you for an interview early this morning?"

He smiled. "You weren't the only one. All the passengers wanted to see me this morning, after the body was found."

"I wanted to tell you that the money was missing and ask you to search the ship for it."

"That's a job for the police." Urizar touched a bell in the bulkhead beside Lindstrom's desk. "Why didn't you tell us about this the moment you came in, Miss Keyes?"

"I wish I had!" Nina smiled ruefully. "But when I saw the script lying on the Captain's desk and you told me you'd found it in a ventilator, I assumed that it was the same ventilator where I'd hidden the money. And that it was empty this morning because you'd removed script and money together. It didn't occur to me that someone else had taken the money from the ventilator and left the script there before you got to it. But now, I suppose, that's what must have happened."

Before Urizar could answer, a knock interrupted them.

"You're going to need more men, Sergeant," explained Urizar to Fernandez. "Get as many as you'll need

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for a thorough search of the ship. You're to look for a package of one hundred dollar bills in United States currency. They will probably be wrapped in pink paper printed with cherubs in gilt. The package will be bulky—about the weight and thickness of five hundred sheets of typewriting paper but only about two thirds the length and breadth."

"A large sum!" murmured Fernandez in awe.

"Yes. So large that no man should search for it alone. Let them work in pairs. As the package may have been opened and its contents scattered you would better make a list of all sums of money you find on board this ship in bills of any currency. And there's one other thing you might look for at the same time," added Urizar, thoughtfully. "A letter in English, handwritten, with ink, or two separate sheets of thin, white notepaper. The first page begins with the words: *my dear wife.* And the second page ends with a signature: *Leslie Dawson.* You probably won't find the first page at all, but you may find the second. Look for it especially among the purser's belongings."

"Si, señor!" Fernandez saluted smartly and went out.

Lindstrom was frowning. "I can't see why anyone should steal the script . . . Unless someone wanted to keep the police from reading it and that could only be achieved by destroying it—not just hiding it."

"It's a rather bulky script to destroy in a hurry," pointed out Urizar.

"Why not toss it overboard?" suggested Nina.

"At sea, yes," returned Urizar. "But in port, as we are now? Not so good. It might drift ashore or be picked up by a fisherman or longshoreman. And there was no time to burn it. No doubt the ventilator was a temporary hiding place for the script, improvised hastily. It would have been thrown overboard later when the ship was at sea again."

"Then you think I and whoever took the script just happened to choose the same hiding place for the script and the money?" asked Nina.

"I mistrust coincidences," said Urizar. "It seems more likely that the money was taken first and the thief remembered the ventilator afterward when he needed a temporary hiding place for the script in a hurry. Or he may have discovered the package of money there while reaching inside the ventilator to hide the script. The important thing was not to have the script found in his own possession. For the fact that he was curious enough about Miss Keyes to steal her script might make the police suspicous of him. So, once he'd read it, he had to leave it where it couldn't be associated with him, if it were found. But the fact that the script was stolen and hidden suggests that there is something in that script which someone doesn't want us to know."

Nina's face looked sallow as if she had paled under her suntan. "Captain Urizar?"

"Yes?"

"What good would it do to suppress or destroy the script unless I, who wrote the script, was also—destroyed? As long as I remain alive,

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I can tell you everything in the script even if it is gone."

Urizar smiled his fine-edged, rather melancholy smile. "I realize that, Miss Keyes. In the script you said you were going to tell everyone on board you had written such an account of the last few days. Have you done so?"

"Not yet. I was going to do that after I had finished the script."

"Then I suggest that you carry out your plan now," said Urizar. "Make a point of telling everyone on board that you have written such a script and that the police have read it. That should give you some protection."

"But not as much as I had hoped," answered Nina. "When I wrote it I believed that someone trained in criminal investigation would read more into those incidents than I could."

Urizar smiled again, almost ruefully. "There are still too many unknown quantities in the equation to hope for any final solution now. Perhaps you can help me with some of these unknowns. In the script you mention putting your wallet in your pocket last night. Left side or right?"

"Left."

"And Leslie Dawson was sitting on your left at table when she jostled your arm as she leaned forward to address Harley. That is probably the moment when she took your wallet...." Urizar went on more briskly. "You were awake all night typing the script. Did you hear any unusual sounds—before you heard the steward scream this morning?"

"Sounds? Oh, you mean did I hear Leslie Dawson when she fell? Thank God, I didn't!"

"Then you heard nothing?"

"I didn't hear anything, until I heard the steward this morning. You see, my door was shut and my typewriter was clattering. And the storm raged until nearly six. Once or twice, when I paused in typing at the end of a line, I heard footsteps. But I thought they came from the ship's crew fighting the storm. Once I heard someone running..."

"What time was that?"

"I guess about four A.M. I had looked at my watch just a few minutes before then."

Lindstrom looked curiously at Urizar. "A woman running in terror from a venomous snake, feeling herself topple over a balustrade—surely she would scream?"

"The storm would take care of that," mused Urizar. "A clap of thunder, louder than the rest—"

"And that would mean she died before five-thirty A.M.," added Lindstrom. "Since the storm was over then..."

Urizar considered this. "Do you know when Leslie Dawson retired to her cabin for the night?" he asked Nina.

"Just before midnight," she answered. "We left the Harley's bathroom together and she went straight to her cabin."

Urizar turned to look at Lindstrom. "Then she didn't run out of her cabin because she suddenly discovered the snake there. She had already been in her cabin some hours when Miss Keyes heard the sound of running feet at four A.M. What was she doing, awake and out of her cabin in the

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small hours of the morning?"

"We have a word for it," answered Lindstrom. "Hijacking."

"You mean—Leslie Dawson was after the money?" cried Nina.

"Why not?" Lindstrom expanded his suggestion. "The old story of a common thief outwitted by an uncommon thief who doesn't stop at murder. Suppose it was Leslie Dawson's vigilance that gave you the feeling you were being watched, Miss Keyes. We know she took your wallet. Suppose she saw you put the money in the ventilator. Suppose she returned to the ventilator in the middle of the night, when she was fairly sure no one would see her, in order to get the money. And suppose that all the time she was watching you, someone else, who knew what she was up to, was watching her. As soon as she took the money from the ventilator this other person relieved her of it in turn and silenced her by killing her."

"Using a snake as a murder weapon?" Urizar was skeptical.

"It seems dangerously uncertain," admitted Lindstrom. "But it has one advantage: just because it is such an uncertain method, most police officers would assume it was not murder at all, but accident, and there would be no real investigation."

"True enough—except for one thing: the first time the snake escaped last night the nails in the box lid threw doubt on the idea that it was purely at accident. Would a murderer see any advantage in using the snake as a weapon after that?"

"Then you believe Leslie Dawson's death was an accident?" said Lindstrom.

"Not after Rupert Lord's death, also an 'accident' and also involving an animal, his horse. As I told you, I mistrust coincidence. There is plain evidence of human agency in the disappearance of the script and the money; and in the potential suicide note, signed with Leslie Dawson's name, dictated to Miss Keyes. I believe the snake was used as a weapon. But I don't understand why it was used. There must be some reason for it we don't know."

"I can see how Leslie Dawson might learn about the money if she were a maid at the Lords'. But how did anyone else know that she was after it?" Nina was puzzled.

"Miss Keyes, a large sum in cash suggests some illegal transaction. And that suggests that more than one group of unscrupulous people may have been interested in the destination of this money from the beginning. Leslie Dawson may have been a simple crook. Her murderer may have been some crooked agent of an organization whose financial interests clashed with Rupert Lord's."

Anger brought a deeper color to Nina's cheeks and shook her voice. "Rupert is dead. Can't you leave his memory alone?"

Urizar considered her sadly. "Hasn't it occurred to you that Rupert Lord knew the money was in that envelope when he gave it to you? That he was using you deliberately as an unconscious agent?"

"I—don't know." She seemed close to tears.

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"The money belongs to Rupert Lord's estate now," said Urizar more gently.

"Of course you're right." Her lips quivered. "I just can't realize that Rupert is dead."

"What were his instructions about the envelope?"

"I suppose there is no harm in telling you—now. Rupert asked me to take the package to the old Marshallton house on Carroll Road in Chevy Chase. There is no street number. I was to take it there at eight o'clock next Friday evening and give it to a Mr. Bland."

"Who is Mr. Bland?"

"I don't know. I gathered he was some employee or business associate of Rupert's. I don't know anything about Rupert's business affairs."

"There is only one more thing." Urizar was at his most suave. From Lindstrom's desk, he took an American passport. "Was this the passport you saw in Leslie Dawson's cabin?"

"How can I tell? It was closed. I saw only the gilt eagle on the red cover."

"This is the one Captain Lindstrom found in her cabin." Urizar flipped the cover open. "It's a joint passport issued to a married couple—Albert and Leslie Dawson. The photograph of Leslie Dawson is unflattering but recognizable. Her husband's picture may not be such a good likeness. But there is a chance you may recognize the man."

"You mean he, too, may have been employed by the Lords? A houseman or chauffeur?"

"Possibly." Urizar held out the passport. "Have you ever seen Albert Dawson before?"

Nina took the passport in her hand distastefully as if the murder had tainted it. Husband and wife were side by side in a harsh light against a white background that brought out everything that was coarse in Leslie Dawson's dark, full-blooded beauty. The man was swarthy, too. His somber eyes looked out at the world with an expression of mature intelligence sharpened by some souring experience. A dark, curling beard gave him an almost Moorish look.

"Why, of course! Without the beard, I'd know him anywhere. It's . . ."

Urizar stopped her with a curt gesture. "Take a look, Lars."

Lindstrom bent over the passport, frowning. "Well, I'll be . . ."

Urizar straightened. "Thank you, Miss Keyes. We won't detain you any longer. Lars, will you send word to Albert Dawson, alias Henriquez Mendoza, asking him to come to your cabin?"

CHAPTER TEN

THE MAN HAD AN ALMOST MILITARY bearing. The trim blue uniform set off his broad shoulders and barrel chest, flat thighs and long legs—a body built for man's first occupations, hunting and fighting. His skin was copper brown, hardly darker than a suntanned white skin. His face was broad at the temples, square at the jaw.

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"Sit down, Mendoza," said Lindstrom gruffly. "This is Captain Urizar of the Municipal Police. We have just discovered that the dead woman was your wife. I'm sorry—about the whole thing."

The man answered in a toneless voice. "You found the passport, of course. I wasn't sure you would recognize my photography with that beard."

"Your real name is Albert Dawson?"

"Yes." Dawson sat looking down at the cap in his hands. "We got that passport some years ago when we planned to go to South America together. Leslie had it renewed when she came to Quisqueya. If she stayed there longer than three months she had to have a passport and she was afraid to apply for a new one under a false name. She could always explain to any official that 'Livia Crespi' was a stage name. Of course I didn't need a passport as purser on a ship touching so briefly at various Caribbean ports. But if I had decided to leave the service and stay with Leslie in Central America, the joint passport would have come in handy."

"Why did you sign up with us under a false name?" asked Lindstrom.

His eyes measured Urizar. "I think I'd better tell you the truth. You'll soon find out. I got into trouble in the States a few years ago. My name was in the newspapers. After that I called myself Henriquez Mendoza and my wife took the name Livia Crespi. We both look enough like Latin Americans to make those names plausible and we both speak Spanish and French."

"How did your wife come to be employed by Rupert Lord?" asked Urizar.

"I met Mr. Lord when he traveled on this ship. Leslie wanted a job in Quisqueya while I was at sea. I recommended her to Mrs. Lord without telling her that Leslie was my wife."

"Did you visit your wife at the Lords' when your ship was in port at Quisqueya?" asked Urizar.

"A few times. I didn't wear my purser's uniform or go anywhere I was likely to meet the Lords. I wore the white shirt and trousers of the native workman and met Leslie in the grounds outside the house. I even carried shears so I'd look like a gardener."

"Did you send a telegram from the post office in Saint Andrew just before sailing yesterday?" asked Urizar.

"Yes. I was telegraphing a small hotel in New York to reserve a double room for us."

"Miss Keyes saw you writing that telegram," went on Urizar. "Naturally she was surprised."

"Surprised?" Dawson looked at Urizar blankly. "Why?"

"Because you had told her a few hours before that you didn't know how to read or write."

"There is some mistake. I had no conversation with Miss Keyes until she came on board this ship. I don't recall ever seeing her before. Even if I had, I should not have told her or anyone else that I was illiterate. I happen to be a graduate of Columbia."

"Then why did you ask her to

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write a letter for you? A letter signed with your wife's name—Leslie Dawson?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Urizar picked up the typescript. "Miss Keyes has written a very full account of everything that happened in the last few days. I'm going to read you the part that tells about your dictating a letter to her."

For a few minutes there was no sound in the cabin but Urizar's quiet voice reading Nina's story. When he came to her glimpse of Dawson in the post office, he laid down the script.

"So that was why Miss Keyes behaved so strangely when she came to my office yesterday evening!"

"Well? Have you nothing else to say, Dawson? Ostensibly the letter was addressed to your wife, but actually it was signed with her own name—not yours. The second page of that letter signed with your wife's name could pass for a suicide note if it were found beside her dead body. And now—your wife is dead."

"Was the note found beside her body?" asked Dawson coolly.

"No."

"In that case, the whole thing seems irrelevant. For even if the note had been found beside her body it wouldn't have been in her handwriting. And death by snake-bite hardly suggests suicide."

"Perhaps that is why she died of snake-bite and why the note was not found beside her body."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it possible that you planned to kill your wife in a manner that would suggest suicide? And then found it necessary to alter your plan at the last moment?"

"Why?"

"You had obtained from Miss Keyes a suicide note in a woman's handwriting signed with your wife's name. At the last moment you discovered that Miss Keyes was sailing on the same ship with your wife and yourself and that she had recognized you as the man who dictated the letter. She knew too much about your original plan. So you had to make your wife's death look like accident instead of suicide. You did so by releasing the snake in her cabin. And, of course, you destroyed the suicide note."

Dawson remained calm and analytical. "A suicide note in another woman's handwriting would hardly be evidence of Leslie's suicide," he objected. "Such a note would have to be in Leslie's own writing to carry any weight as evidence."

"Was there any specimen of your wife's writing on board?"

"No. I don't believe so. But there was a specimen of Miss Keyes' writing—two traveler's checks she filled out when I asked her for a contribution to the Seaman's Home."

"You could have destroyed those checks."

"But if Miss Keyes saw the suicide note—as she might—she would recognize her own writing. Not only that but she would also recognize the phraseology of the note that had been dictated to her. I may not be very intelligent, but I'm not stupid enough to make a plan like that."

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"Miss Keyes would recognize the note if she were aboard the ship when your wife died and saw the note or heard about it. But when you made this plan you didn't know Miss Keyes would be aboard."

"As purser I had seen the passenger list five days before we sailed."

"But did you associate the name on the passenger list—Nina Keyes—with the woman to whom you dictated that letter at the Lords'?"

"Captain Urizar, how can I answer that when I assure you I did not dictate the letter? I cannot explain it any more than you can. The idea that I planned to murder my wife while she was a passenger on the same ship where I was serving as purser is even more absurd. For, whether Miss Keyes was on board or not, I was bound to be involved in any investigation the moment you found the joint passport Leslie carried, which would identify me immediately as her husband.

"I did not see Miss Keyes at the Lords' house that last day and I did not dictate that letter to her or anyone else. Indeed I can see only one possible explanation of the incident."

"And that is?"

"Mistaken identity. I did not dictate the letter but someone else did—perhaps someone who looks something like me. According to Miss Keyes' own account she had only the briefest glimpse of the man and he was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat pulled down over his eyes. She seems to have been in an overwrought state of nerves at the time. When she saw me in the post office and later aboard this ship she jumped to the conclusion that I was the same man. His costume—the white shirt and trousers and battered straw hat—is worn by every farmer and workman on the island. That was why I wore it on my own visits to Leslie at the Lords'—to escape notice. Anyone else might have worn it, too."

But one thing still troubled Urizar: could it be coincidence that Nina Keyes had identified the man who dictated that letter signed with Leslie Dawson's name as the man who was secretly married to Leslie Dawson?

"Accepting your theory for the moment," said Urizar. "Suppose someone else did dictate that letter. Why was it signed with your wife's name? And why was it dictated to Nina Keyes? Have you any explanation for that?"

"No." Dawson answered slowly. "And, like all unexplained things, it is disturbing. How did this man know my wife's real name? She was 'Livia Crespi' to the Lords and their household. Why did he want a suicide note signed with my wife's name? Is he the man who killed her—if she was killed? And, if so, why didn't he use the suicide note since he had gone to so much trouble to obtain it?"

Lindstrom intervened. "Have you any idea why your wife was outside her own cabin last night wearing nothing but a nightgown?"

"At first I assumed that she ran out of her cabin when she found the snake there. But it's just possible she was walking in her sleep and came across the snake in the corridor. She did walk in her sleep, so that must be what happened if the snake es-

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caped from its box accidentally."

"Were you on friendly terms with your wife, Mr. Dawson?" asked Urizar.

"We had our disagreements. What married couple does not?"

"Yesterday afternoon you and your wife were overheard talking through a ventilator in the corridor. It was a rather—lively disagreement."

This was a shot in the dark but Dawson made no denial. His gaze became somber and abstracted, as if he were looking within himself, scarcely conscious of externals. "I can hardly expect you to understand," he said. "Leslie and I were Virgin Islanders and so technically American. She was actually half-Hindu, half-English. There is French, Negro and Carib Indian in me. We met in New York where we had both gone to get a better education than the islands afford. I did manage to get the education. Leslie tired of that before I met her. She was a dancer in a Harlem night club then—not a very successful one. As soon as we married, I wanted to get out of the country—make a fresh start in South America."

"Why?" put in Lindstrom.

Dawson smiled sardonically. "Would you care to live in the United States with a skin as dark as mine? Think it over. You see, I'm a mulatto—half-white, half-black. I don't fit in anywhere... In South America, it's different. We both speak French and Spanish fluently. We weren't full-blooded Negroes; we weren't much darker than the people of Spanish extraction. In South America we would be absolutely free to go anywhere and do anything, socially or economically. So, I tried to raise money quickly in the only way I knew that it could be done. That was what got me into trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" asked Urizar.

"Jail. I peddled marihuana. In six months I could have made enough to give Leslie security as well as equality in South America. But I was caught. I served a two-year sentence. When I got out I took the name 'Henriquez Mendoza' and got this job as purser, thanks to the labor shortage in the last year of the war. It gave me a chance to look around in Venezuela and Ecuador and pick a place to settle."

"Why did your wife take a place as maid in the Lord household?"

"That was temporary—just to take care of her while I went on down to Venezuela with this ship and looked for an opening there. I had various schemes for making money after we got there. We were going back to New York this trip to see if we could raise some capital from wealthy South Americans living in New York."

Lindstrom stirred uneasily in his chair. "I suppose a sum like one hundred thousand dollars would have given you just the start you wanted in a new land where there was no color line?"

Dawson smiled acidly. "Where would Leslie or I get one hundred thousand—just like that? We would have settled for ten thousand, Captain Lindstrom. Just something to give us a fighting chance."

Urizar lifted the black wallet on

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Lindstrom's desk, weighed the wallet on the palm of his hand. "This belongs to Miss Keyes. It was found among your wife's effects. Can you explain why?"

Dawson shrugged. "I know nothing about it. I can see only two possible explanations: either it was left among Leslie's things—for whatever reason—by someone who murdered her or Leslie herself took it from Miss Keyes—why, I don't know. We had enough petty cash and Leslie was no fool. She wouldn't risk a prison sentence for a few dollars. She knew too much about prison from me."

"Wasn't it unusual to take up a collection for the Seaman's Home so early in the voyage?" asked Urizar.

Dawson had an answer for everything. "I was afraid some of the passengers might leave the ship at Puerta Vieja. Their tickets had stopover privileges."

A discreet tap on the door interrupted them. Lindstrom called: "Come in!" Dr. Burano tripped into the room on mincing feet.

Dawson rose. "Do you require anything more of me?"

"Not at present," said Urizar. "But you understand that no one is to go ashore?"

"Certainly, sir." Dawson went out.

Burano's medical report was short and to the point. According to him Livia Crespi had died of snakebite. To be precise, Livia had been bitten by the snake, panicked, ran through the corridor and had fallen over the balustrade. Fear and the exercise of running stimulated her circulation, pumping venom to her heart. When she fell down the stairwell, she had gone into a state of shock—and shock sends blood to the heart. With the blood came the venom and soon afterwards, death. It was, in Dr. Burano's opinion, a very sad accident. Murder was out of the question as far as he was concerned and he took with ill grace Urizar's suggestion that he analyze the contents of a glass found near Livia Crespi's bed. Nevertheless he promised to radio the results of the laboratory test of the suspicious liquid as soon as possible.

"So!" Lindstrom breathed a deep sigh of relief. "There is no murder and we shall be able to sail at ten P.M. after all. The Directors will be pleased."

"No murder?" Urizar's black brows drew down together, shadowing his brown eyes, making his whole face darker. He sighed aloud as another knock fell on the door.

"Sergeant Fernandez reporting."

"Yes?" Urizar looked up.

The Sergeant saluted. "*Señor Capitán,* we have found no sign of the package you described aboard this ship. We searched everywhere, but we didn't even find the wrapping you mentioned—the pink paper printed with gilt cherubs."

"How much money did you find on board the ship?"

"Here is the list." Fernandez produced a paper.

Urizar glanced at it. Opposite the name of each passenger and crewman was a small sum. The total was far less than one hundred thousand dollars. He crushed the paper in his hand, tossed it aside. "And the letter

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in English, handwritten with ink, on a half sheet of thin, white paper?"

"No sign of such a letter anywhere, *señor Capitán.*"

"You searched the purser's quarters? Thoroughly?"

"But of course, *señor*!" Fernandez was reproachful. "We did find this." He held a small envelope over the desk. Out fell a curved splinter of thin glass, with a little nodule blown in the glass at one end. "Under the body," he explained. "The *Señor* Doctor Burano said it looked like a splinter from one of those little air-tight *ampoules* that contain certain varieties of medicine. There is no cork or opening. One files off the glass tip at one end to extract the medicine."

"I'll keep that," said Urizar. "Anything else?"

"The ship's carpenter complains his tool box has been tampered with. He's not sure if any of the tools are missing or not. He has so many."

"That's helpful." Urizar sighed. "All right, Fernandez. You may go. But I want a police guard on the ship until she sails. No one is to go ashore."

When Fernandez had gone, Lindstrom drew a deep breath. "The money was tossed overboard. Or destroyed. It's too big a package to escape notice in a thorough search like that."

Urizar looked up sharply. "Tell me one thing, Lars: could the lid of the snake box have warped itself open a second time—after your carpenter screwed it down?"

Lindstrom hedged. "I—it's hard to say...."

"You should know! You saw him at work. Or are you more concerned with having your wretched tub sail on schedule than you are with getting at the truth?"

Lindstrom looked still more uneasy. "I trust that you will not disturb your fellow-passengers, Miguel. After all, we know now that this death was only an accident and, though a sum of money has disappeared..."

"On the contrary, Lars, we are dealing with a murderer. A very clever and subtle murderer, who has killed twice without leaving any evidence of his act—Rupert Lord and Leslie Dawson—and who may kill again. To me, that is more important than the money at present. That is why I am sailing with you tonight. I can't arrest him. I don't even know who he is. But he can't keep me from sailing on the same ship with him—just as you suggested a few hours ago ..." Urizar smiled. "I'm glad we've let everyone know I'm a police officer. That may shake his nerve."

"He may kill again?" repeated Lindstrom.

Urizar's smile faded into a more somber expression. "We must inform Nina Keyes that a thorough search of the ship has failed to reveal any sign of the letter she wrote at the gardener's dictation. That may teach a little caution even to a young woman of her rash temperament. She might even consent to lock her cabin door every night."

"But why should she?" objected Lindstrom. "Surely you don't suggest that..."

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Urizar cut him short. "If I were Nina Keyes, I wouldn't enjoy realizing that somewhere there may exist a potential suicide note, obtained from me by fraud, and written in my own hand. A note that has not been used —yet."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

URIZAR WOKE TO A BRIGHT MORNING sun that reddened his own eyelids and a steady throbbing from the ship's engine that shook his bones. His shoulder tingled, for he was lying with it jammed against the knob of a rivet in the bulkhead. And he was acutely thirsty.

A cold shower washed away the tattered ends of his broken sleep. He put on sandals, white shirt and trousers, and went down the corridor to the deck. It was empty.

"Good morning!"

Urizar turned, and instantly recognized Fabian Harley. Nina had reported the man's white hair, apple cheeks and florid manner faithfully in her script. But now that Urizar superimposed his own view of Harley upon Nina's the two images did not coincide precisely. One trait in Harley Nina had not mentioned at all—the look of defeat at the back of his eyes, behind the cordial smile. Why had Nina missed something that was so evident to Urizar?

"You are Captain Urizar?" he was saying. "Of the Municipal Police in Puerta Vieja?"

Urizar bowed. "And you are Dr. Harley, the herpetologist. I've read your books. And like them. But—may I ask how you knew me?"

"You were pointed out to me yesterday by one of the stewards. Doubtless you have heard that I am the man who brought the bushmaster on board this ship?" Harley leaned both arms on the rail and looked down into the crystal wavelets that sheered away from the ship's side. "I'm glad you're sailing with us. Yesterday there was a rumor you had given up the case."

Urizar's eyelids drooped sleepily. "That rumor was correct, Dr. Harley. There is no 'case.' I am sailing with you as a fellow-passenger—nothing more."

Harley half turned for a better look at the man beside him. "You are serious?"

"Entirely so. When this—accident occurred I had already planned to sail last night. I'm taking my vacation in New York."

"But, good God, there are so many points that have never been explained!" It was impossible to read Harley's expression now that his eyes were puckered and squinting against the sun, but his voice was vehement, almost fearful. "I feel strongly about it because I feel myself partly to blame. I should have put the screws in the snake-box myself. Or watched my boys while they were doing it."

"But no one was killed the first time the snake escaped," said Urizar. "And the second time it happened the ship's carpenter had fastened the lid down with screws. If anyone is to blame, it is he."

"That's what troubles me," re-

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turned Harley. "Medusa—the snake—could not get out of that box by herself, when the lid was screwed down. Warping wood can't push up a screw as it does a nail. Captain Urizar, that second time someone let Medusa out of her box deliberately. It couldn't have happened any other way."

"Suppose the ship's carpenter put screws in the holes you had drilled already—the same holes the nails were in. And those holes were a shade too large for the carpenter's screws."

Harley lost his fresh color. "In that case the second escape wouldn't have occurred without the first. And, as I was responsible for the first escape, I would then be responsible for this unfortunate woman's death."

"But not criminally responsible," said Urizar quietly. "That would be accident, not murder. So, as I said, there is no case. Nothing I could take into court."

Harley seemed to be fighting a battle with himself. "Why don't you talk to the ship's carpenter?" he said at last.

"I did last night. He claims the screws were so tight they could only be raised by human agency."

Harley drew a deep breath. "Captain Urizar, those screws were absolutely tight. I watched him put them in but—once the lid was fastened down with screws it would be easy to raise it again with a screwdriver. If it were nailed down, you'd need a clawhammer. It would be a longer, more tedious operation, making more noise and so more likely to attract attention."

"Would it take strong hands?"

"Not necessarily. Putting the screws in, especially the first time, requires a certain strength. Extracting them is easier. The ship's carpenter has screwdrivers in several sizes. His tool box is unlocked and quite accessible."

"It happened at night," said Urizar. "And the snake-box is in your bathroom. Could anyone do that without waking you or your wife?"

"Our bathroom stands between two double cabins. It has a communicating door on either side. The other cabin is empty. Its door to the corridor is unlocked. My wife and I sleep with our bathroom door shut. Anyone could go through the empty cabin to our bathroom without waking us.

Urizar put out his cigarette. "To sum all this up, Dr. Harley, you've concocted an ingenious theory to explain how the snake could have been used as an instrument of murder without your knowledge."

"I had to devise such a theory," retorted Harley. "To satisfy the facts of the case."

In the dining saloon Dawson sat at one end of the long table by himself, drinking black coffee and smoking a cigarette. He bowed gravely to Harley and Urizar as they passed. Two women were already drinking fruit juice at the other end of the table—Nina Keyes and an older woman whose hair was piled high in elaborate scrolls. The amethysts in her wide silver bracelets matched the paler lilac of her voile dress. When Harley said: "This is Captain Urizar—my wife"—her smile was quick and wide, displaying pretty teeth.

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Nina's clear brown glance rested on Urizar. "I didn't realize you were sailing with us. Does that mean . . . ?"

Urizar cut her short. "It doesn't mean anything, Miss Keyes, except that I am on my way to a vacation in New York."

"I'm glad," she said simply, as if she meant it.

"You came aboard at Puerta Vieja?" Joan Harley was making conversation.

"Yes," answered Urizar. "That is my home."

"Then you've missed all the excitement," said Joan artlessly as a child.

It took Urizar a full moment to remember that no one at table knew Dawson was the dead woman's husband—except Nina and himself.

Joan rattled on in her clear, tinkling little voice. "The most frightful things have been happening. A horrible bushmaster—one of my husband's specimens—escaped from its box and killed a very pretty young woman. It was really dreadful."

"I suppose it wouldn't have been dreadful at all if the victim had been old and ugly?"

It was a man's voice, speaking from the doorway. He slouched into the room, hands in pockets, lips puckered in a small, tight smile. That smile identified him for Urizar as Jim Sherwood. But once again there was a discrepancy between Nina's portrait of the man in her script and the real man as Urizar saw him in the flesh. Nina had called him "derelict" and "slack." Perhaps that was how he would impress a woman. But Urizar saw beyond the frayed cuffs and the hair that needed cutting to a body that moved as if it were in hard condition and a look in the eyes that was shrewd, cynical and humorous.

"Well, not precisely, Mr. Sherwood." Joan was prettily petulant. "But it does make an accident like that doubly sad when the victim is young and attractive."

Harley was speaking to the steward who had served his coffee. "Chandra Das, have you got that steel wool for me?"

"Not yet, sar. As soon as breakfast is served, I'll bring it to you."

"Please do," returned Harley. "It's crucially important." His gaze shifted to Joan. "What about a little turn on deck, my dear?" He was on his feet, ready to pull out her chair. "A glorious morning—sun, sea and salt air—and a woman whose complexion is fresh as a girl's, even in the most brilliant sunshine!"

Joan flashed a bright, shallow smile over her shoulder at him and stood up, her cheeks faintly pink with pleasure. Dawson rose at the same moment. He was first at the door. He followed them outside.

Sherwood pushed away his empty coffee cup. His hand went to his breast pocket and came out with a cigar wrapped in cellophane.

Nina sprang to her feet. "If you're going to smoke that thing here, I'm going on deck!"

Stolidly Sherwood peeled the cellophane wrapper. Urizar started to rise. Under the table he felt Sherwood's hand on his knee, detaining him. He sat still.

Nina left the room with a glance at

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Sherwood that should have withered him. He merely laughed, the first puff of smoke veiling his eyes. "I usually smoke my after-breakfast cigar on deck," he said dryly.

"Indeed?"

"This time I wanted a moment alone with you." He lowered his voice. "You are acting for the police, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

Sherwood's eyes vanished again behind another puff of smoke. "That snake was set free the second time by human agency. There's no way in the world those screws could have worked loose by themselves. So—I conclude you're a police officer here on business, giving the calf enough rope."

Urizar waited until the cigar smoke had ebbed again and he had a clear view of Sherwood's face. "How could the murderer get the snake out of its box without being attacked himself? And how could he risk transporting it to the neighborhood of his intended victim?"

Sherwood laid his cigar on the edge of an ashtray and leaned forward earnestly. "I've asked myself that question. Perhaps he was someone used to handling bushmasters. Someone who wasn't afraid because he knew that, with prompt, intelligent treatment, their venom is rarely fatal."

Urizar smiled. "In other words—that eminent herpetologist, Dr. Fabian Harley?"

Sherwood shifted his ground. "Other people besides zoologists know something about snakes. For instance, a native of the West Indies, such as our purser, Henriquez Mendoza. Indeed anyone who lived in Quisqueya for a month or so might learn that snake-bite is not fatal unless the venom is allowed to reach the heart.

"But, granting your point, how could a murderer be sure that his victim would panic and allow venom to reach the heart? How could a murderer be sure that the snake would strike a vein? All these factors contributed to the woman's death, and none are factors a murderer could anticipate with any certainty. As yet we have no evidence that could establish a case of murder in court."

Sherwood drew on his cigar again. "What about the snake's first escape? Accident? Or design?"

"What do you think?" returned Urizar.

"At the time I believed it accident," Sherwood answered promptly, as if he had thought all this out some time ago. "The other box containing the bat was fastened with screws. I looked then to make sure. But Harley's native boys may have run out of screws by the time they came to the snake-box. They'd be lazy enough to use nails then instead of going out to buy some screws. Suppose this caused the first escape of the snake. It may have given the murderer the idea of using the snake as a weapon. Perhaps he thought a second escape of the snake would pass automatically as a second accident. And it would, except for one thing, which he overlooked."

"And that was?"

"Once the lid was screwed down, after the snake's first escape, everyone would know it could not be raised again without human agency."

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"It seems a singularly gross error for a murderer otherwise so intelligent," murmured Urizar.

"Then what do you think?"

"I hardly know what to think at present. But I am suspicious of all so-called accidents in a criminal case."

Sherwood's cigar was burnt out. He dropped the stub in an ashtray. "You alarm me, Captain Urizar."

"Why?"

"You're suggesting that one of the people aboard this ship is a murderer whose methods and motives you know nothing about. We'll all be rubbing shoulders with him for the rest of the voyage without knowing which one of us he is. I don't like the idea."

"Neither do I." Urizar rose. "For all I know, I may be talking to him now."

Sherwood's eyes burned darkly for a moment. The man had a temper. He mastered it with a laugh. "You think I would talk to you like this if I were the man?"

"I think you would try to pump me. And that's what you've been doing. Not too successfully, I hope."

He was so conscious of Sherwood's stare that he could feel it against his back when he left the room.

In the upper lounge, beside the purser's office, a framed plan of each deck hung on the wall. Under cover of lighting a cigarette, Urizar paused before it to study the arrangement of cabins. A cheerful voice spoke at his elbow.

"Lost your way?"

Urizar turned. Beside him stood a boy who looked hardly yet a man. His youthful blondness created an illusion of radiance in the shade beyond the bar of sunlight from the open door to the deck. If this were Tony Brooke, Nina's script had done him less than justice. Tony's nose was blunt rather than "snub." His fair skin had burned to a healthy apricot-pink rather than "cherry-red." His hair was like fine silver-gold wire. It was cut short, probably to suppress a tendency to curl. The deep blue of his eyes was repeated in a blazer worn with a white shirt open at the neck. His white trousers were creased and spotless, as if they had just come from a tailor.

"Merely trying to get my bearings," answered Urizar. "My cabin is aft, on the port side of A deck, at the end of a cross corridor, but I can't find it on this plan."

"There are only two cross corridors aft," said Tony. "Miss Keyes has a cabin at the end of the first corridor on the port side and the Harleys have the cabin across the corridor from hers. So yours must be one of these two at the end of the second corridor on the port side."

Urizar looked at the plan again. "Then across the corridor from me is the empty cabin that adjoins the Harleys' bathroom?"

"Yes. All the other cabins on your corridor are empty. Sherwood is next to the Harleys. I'm opposite Sherwood, between Miss Keyes and the cabin that belonged to that woman who died—Livia Crespi."

This opening had come about so naturally that he didn't hesitate to take advantage of it. But his voice betrayed only casual interest.

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"Did you hear anything? The night she died?"

"Not a thing. Except Nina Keyes typing. You know how penetrating the clack of a typewriter can be—even a so-called 'silent' portable. I turned in at eleven but I was slow getting to sleep—the storm was noisy that night. Then, at twelve o'clock, that little tap-tap-tap began, so I didn't really get to sleep until two in the morning."

"You didn't hear anyone cry out? Footfalls? Or a door opening and shutting?"

"No, I suppose it happened after two, when I was asleep. After lying awake so long, I slep like a log until six when Nina woke me."

"And you heard no typing after six?"

"Of course not."

Through the balusters of the stairwell Urizar saw Nina's sleek, dark head and sun-browned neck. She mounted the last flight and came toward them.

"Ready for that deck tennis?" sang out Tony.

"Yes. Would you like to play, Captain Urizar?"

He glanced through the door to the sun-baked deck. A steward was rigging the net under the supervision of Joan Harley and Sherwood.

"No, thanks. Not in this heat," said Urizar.

Nina and Tony went out on deck together. From the doorway, Urizar watched the beginning of the game.

When he was sure they were all engrossed in the game, Urizar went below and searched Sherwood's cabin. The man puzzled him, and he felt morally—if not legally justified in going through his belongings. The only thing of interest that he found was a blank envelope with the name of the Acme Construction Company in the left hand corner.

CHAPTER TWELVE

URIZAR STROLLED AFT TO HIS OWN CORridor and entered it. But he did not go to his own cabin. He paused before the door opposite—the door that led to the empty cabin adjoining the Harleys' bathroom.

The door opened without a sound. Urizar crossed the room to the bathroom opposite. Again a knob and hinges moved noiselessly as he pushed the door open.

Here he was greeted by a sour, musky odor and a rustling overhead. He looked up. The green wooden box was still lashed with rope to a pipe on the ceiling. From the mesh-covered opening a devilish little face looked down at him fiercely. He knew he was looking at the only witness who had actually seen the snake released from its box. . . .

"Good morning, Dracula!" he whispered.

The mouth opened in a snarl of defiance. Teeth like white needles gleamed from the shadow. . . .

Urizar's gaze circled the bathroom slowly. The door to the Harleys' cabin stood ajar. Sun streamed through a deck porthole onto another

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rose-colored rug. There was a sewing basket on the table and a few books—*The Managerial Revolution, Darkness at Noon.* But the magazines were *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar.* A queer marriage. . . .

"Why, Captain Urizar!"

He swung around.

Joan Harley stood in the doorway of her cabin, eyes wide with astonishment. One hand held a bottle that shone dark red against her lilac dress.

"Señora!" Urizar bowed. "I owe you an apology. I mistook your cabin for mine. Once inside, I couldn't resist such an opportunity to make the acquaintance of Dracula."

Joan accepted this improvised excuse with a tolerant grimace. "I've come to feed Dracula," she remarked calmly.

"Perhaps I can help?"

"Oh, thank you. It's simply a matter of climbing on a chair and pour the contents of this bottle through the mesh-covered hole in the box lid."

Urizar uncorked the bottle. He kept his hand well away from the top opening, even though it was mesh-covered. Through the side opening he could see the long tongue of the bat darting eagerly at the red stream splashing into its saucer.

"Beef blood?" he asked when it was over.

"Yes. Beaten with a whisk to remove the clotting element. That way it keeps liquid indefinitely."

"Is this the only think you feed him?"

"It's the only thing he'll eat."

Urizar took out a small envelope of thick paper, the kind jewelers use. He shook the contents into the palm of one hand—a long, curved splinter of thin glass with a nodule at one end. "I happened to find this." He did not say where it had been found. "It occurred to me that it might be part of an airtight *ampoule* containing some perishable liquid used as food for the bat."

"No, but . . ." Joan Harley moved to the small cupboard above the washstand and opened the door. Her glance scanned the glass shelves, then shifted to Urizar. "It's gone." Her voice was flat. "Our first-aid kit."

"Then this was an *ampoule* of medicine?"

"Anti-venin. Made from venom extracted from the fangs of a bushmaster. That was the only thing we had in that sort of *ampoule.* It's injected hypodermically to counteract the effect of snake-bite."

Urizar dropped the splinter back in its envelope. "How many?"

"A dozen."

"What else was in your first-aid kit?"

"A suction cup. A tourniquet. A hypodermic. And a few simple things—a seasick remedy, quinine pills, iodine, morphine and sleeping tablets."

"When did you last see the kit?"

"That's hard to say. But I know it was here day before yesterday, when I used the iodine after pricking my finger with a needle. I must have mislaid the kit then. No one would steal a thing like that."

"Are you sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"The young woman who died was

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not killed by her fall. She was killed by snake-bite. The fall merely immobilized her by breaking her legs, so she could not seek help. But someone might have found her while she was still alive. In that case, a first-aid kit like yours might have saved her life. Without the kit, it would have been far more difficult to save her—perhaps impossible."

Joan sat down as if her knees were too weak to support her. "But—that would be murder—to hide or destroy the anti-venin before exposing her to the snake."

"Yes. And if I were planning anything of that kind, I would want a few *ampoules* of anti-venin handy for myself . . . just in case the snake struck at me instead of my victim. Wouldn't you?"

A knock startled them. Urizar dropped the envelope in his pocket as Joan called out: "Come in!"

One of the Hindu stewards opened the door. He was holding a small cardboard box. "The steel wool for Dr. Harley, madam," he announced solemnly.

"Oh, thank you." Joan's hands fluttered. "I must take this to my husband at once," she told Urizar. "He's been waiting for it all morning."

"Why steel wool?" murmured Urizar. "I've been wondering ever since I heard him ask for it at breakfast."

"Oh, didn't you know? It's for Medusa, the bushmaster. Her box is in the hold now. Captain Lindstrom's orders. So there won't be any more—accidents. When Fabian went to see her this morning before breakfast she was restless. Her scales looked dull and cloudy. He's sure she wants to shed her skin, but there is nothing rough inside her box she can rub against."

"So your husband is going to rub the snake's skin with steel wool?" asked Urizar.

"Only her nose."

Urizar looked down at Joan quizzically.

"The steel wool will be fastened to the end of a long rod," explained Joan. "And it won't irritate Medusa. She'll enjoy it—like a cat having its head scratched. You see, the friction will loosen the skin around her nose. Then she can peel off the rest herself by rubbing against the sides of her box. Fabian has done this before under similar circumstances. Indeed he's described the process so often in his books I thought everybody knew about it."

"Will Dr. Harley have to open the snake-box for this?"

"Yes, but he'll be locked in one section of the hold with the snake. There'll be no danger to anyone else. He's arranged all that with Captain Lindstrom."

They came out on the starboard side of the same deck. She said nothing to invite Urizar's company, but he kept beside her. At the deck door, she called out: "Fabian . . ."

Dr. Harley was standing at the rail, with his back to them. At the sound of Joan's voice he half-turned, one hand still resting on the rail.

"We've brought your steel wool." Joan crossed the deck and stood beside him at the rail. Urizar was a few steps behind her.

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"Splendid!" exclaimed Harley. "I knew they must have some and . . ."

Something black streaked across the bright view of blue sky and bluer sea, missing Urizar by inches.

"Ah . . . !" The sound Harley made was raucous, almost animal—a grunt of shock and pain. His pink face was suddenly white. He looked unbelievingly at his right hand, still clutching the rail. Blood welled from the lacerated knuckles. A heavy Stillson wrench lay on the deck at his feet.

Urizar looked up. There was no one at the edge of the hurricane deck now, but the wrench had come from above. He took the ladder two steps at a time. The upper deck was empty. He ran across to the port ladder. Another emptiness. Someone had run down that ladder while he was running up the other.

He re-crossed the deck to the starboard side and went below. Harley was sitting on the foot rest of a steamer chair. Joan was beside him, his hand lying on a handkerchief in her lap. Both lifted dazed eyes.

"Two of his fingers are crushed," said Joan. "I think they're broken. He can't move them."

"The purser on a ship like this is usually a pharmacist's mate," said Urizar. "I'll get him."

Urizar turned on his heel so sharply he almost collided wtih Albert Dawson, coming out of the lounge. Dawson was looking at Harley, eyes wide and blank with astonishment.

"Dr. Harley has hurt his hand?"

Urizar answered crisply. "A wrench fell from the upper deck. Or was thrown. It struck Dr. Harley's hand. I'm afraid two fingers are broken."

"Oh . . ." Strangely the look of astonishment gave way to sudden comprehension. "The right hand?"

"Yes. You are a pharmacist's mate? And you have a first-aid kit? Please get it."

"Certainly, sir." Dawson's voice was bland now, his face impassive. Urizar wondered if he had imagined that flash of comprehension? But one thing was certain—he had not imagined that first look of utter astonishment. Whoever had aimed the wrench, it was not Albert Dawson.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THAT NIGHT WAS CLEAR AND CALM. Urizar, pacing the deck with an after-dinner cigarette, savored the clean, salt smell of the sea. His shadowy path was chequered with lozenges of light from the windows of the lounge. He paused at one of these to re-read the two radiograms he had just received.

CAPTAIN MIGUEL URIZAR S.S. SANTA CRISTINA AT SEA ALBERT DAWSON PAROLED FOUR YEARS AGO AFTER SERVING TWO YEARS OF FIVE YEAR SENTENCE FOR MARIHUANA TRAFFIC AT SING SING

PATRICK FOYLE
ASSISTANT CHIEF INSPECTOR
NEW YORK POLICE DEPARTMENT.

CAPTAIN MIGUEL URIZAR S.S. SANTA CRISTINA AT SEA ANALYSIS SHOWS

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WATER GLASS CONTAINED LETHAL DOSE SOPORIFIC COMPOUND SAME AS SLEEPING TABLETS
JOSE BURANO
DOCTOR TO MUNICIPAL POLICE
PUERTA VIEJA, SANTA TERESA

"Hello! Thought I'd get a breath of air!"

At the sound of Tony Brooke's voice, Urizar crumpled the radiograms and stuffed them into his pocket.

The lighted window framed a trio at the card table—Joan, Nina and Sherwood. At the empty place, where Tony had been sitting, his cards lay face up—at this distance a blur of glossy white, red and black.

"None of you seem to be mourning Rupert Lord excessively," said Urizar dryly.

"Do you expect us to?" Tony sighed, his gaze following Urizar's to the cheerful scene inside. "It was hardly a shock, you see. We all knew he was going to die after the accident. It was only a question of days."

"Indeed? I didn't realize that." Urizar seemed unusually interested in this remark.

"Oh, yes. His skull was severely fractured. Even the doctor admitted to Amanda there was only one chance in ten that Rupert would recover."

"And yet she left him when he was dying?"

"I know Amanda wouldn't leave Rupert while he was actually dying and I can't understand why she should clear out the moment he was dead. Aside from everything else, Amanda cared for appearances. She wouldn't like to do anything that would cause gossip, if she could possibly help it."

"Then we may assume she couldn't help it?" suggested Urizar.

"Yes, but—why couldn't she?"

"Perhaps she was afraid," said Urizar, quietly.

"Afraid?" Tony's voice stumbled over the word. "What was there to be afraid of? Rupert died accidentally."

"A riding accident—without witnesses."

"Hi!" It was Sherwood's voice calling from the lounge. "I need you, Brooke. We're down six hundred!"

"Coming!" Tony was still looking at Urizar. "It must have been an accident. Everybody liked old Rupert."

"You think so? Of course you know more about it than I do."

Urizar could hear the boy draw a deep breath as he turned back into the lounge.

Urizar strolled after him, circling the table as the last hand was played. Somehow the mere presence of a police officer seemed to disturb these players, to Urizar's sly amusement. A glass was upset, a lighted cigarette scorched the table top and Joan Harley trumped her partner's trick. Sherwood began to tote up the score with almost indecent haste as soon as the last card was played. Joan discovered a sudden concern with her husband's injured hand and hurried below to his cabin. Nina complained of a headache and even Tony decided that sea air made him sleepy—he guessed he'd turn in. Sherwood sat back in his chair and grinned at Urizar.

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"Why didn't you tell me you were working for Acme?" said Urizar.

It was a long shot, but it hit the bull's-eye. Sherwood's blunt fingers, sweeping the pack of cards together, were suddenly still. His smile vanished. His glance sharpened. "What is it to you?"

"I'm still interested in Rupert Lord's death. You claimed you had no personal connection with him. But you had. You work for Acme and Acme wants the Wanasook Dam project to go through. Rupert Lord didn't want it."

"Look." Sherwood squared the pack into two even piles and shuffled them methodically, with almost the expert riffle of a professional gambler. "It's none of your business, but I'll tell you. Rupert Lord was a profiteer, in peace as in war. A racketeer, too clever to step outside the law, but still a racketeer. He had been milking the Wanasook Valley for years. That's where I came from years ago and I know. This was a chance to drive him out and get a square deal for the people of the valley. What could I do as one man against Lord and his business organization? Nothing—of course. But as an agent for the Acme Company that was fighting him—I might do several things. I put that up to Acme and they put me on their payroll."

"For what?"

Sherwood laid the cards down in a single pile and folded his hands over them. "I was to stick with Rupert Lord while the bill was pending in Congress and keep him from getting to Jefferson Stiles or any other Congressman on the Stiles' Committee. If Lord tried any fancy lobbying methods I was to expose him—if there was anything to expose. If there wasn't, I was to stop him—somehow, somewhere, somewhen. Until the bill was passed by both houses and signed by the President."

"And you did?" Urizar's voice was deceptively soft.

"What do you mean?"

"Rupert Lord is stopped."

"He's dead."

"Exactly."

"What the . . .?"

"That's one way of stopping him, isn't it? If there were any witnesses who could put you at the scene of Lord's riding accident at the time it happened . . ."

"There aren't." Sherwood was on his feet now. In anger his dark face looked deadly. "You're outside your jurisdiction now, Captain Urizar. And officially the case that brought you on board is closed—the case of Livia Crespi. I've been frank with you—perhaps too frank. My advice to you now is to forget all about it—for your own good."

Sherwood turned abruptly and left the lounge. Urizar watched, quite unruffled, the tense pose of the receding back. Still smiling, he glanced at his watch—only ten-thirty. Still time for a few words with Lindstrom . . .

As Urizar entered a cross corridor on the upper deck, he noticed a thin wedge of light slicing the shadows from a door that stood ajar. The Harleys' cabin. On impulse he tapped.

"Come in."

Harley was sitting up in bed. A

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traveling lamp, clamped to the headboard, focused light on the book in his left hand. His right hand, heavily bandaged in gauze, lay stiffly across his knees. Joan Harley sat in an armchair close to the bed, knitting.

"I saw your light," said Urizar. "And so I thought I'd look in on the casualty."

Harley smiled. "My hand throbs a little. But that's to be expected. Only one thing worries me—poor Medusa! I wonder if she has managed to shed her skin."

"You haven't been to see her?"

"What's the use? I wouldn't dare open the box now. I can't cope with a bushmaster when my right hand is crippled."

"Now, dear, I told you not to worry," soothed Joan. "Would it make you any happier if I took a look at her? At least I could tell you how she is getting along."

"Would you, Joan?"

"Of course." With an air of graceful martyrdom Joan laid down her knitting and rose. "Perhaps Captain Urizar will keep you company until I come back."

"I'll be glad to."

"Thank you." Joan gave Urizar a warm smile of gratitude, as she swept out of the room.

Harley laughed. "If Joan hadn't been with me at the time I should almost suspect her of throwing that wrench!"

"Why?"

"She likes me to be helpless. Psychologically she's an odd mixture of the mother and the jailer. I am her prisoner and, in another sense, she is my prisoner. That's the story of our marriage."

Urizar found a chair. "I should have said you were a happily married couple."

"Would you?" Harley's free hand plucked at the counterpane. "We are not unhappy. And yet . . . We were fellow students at college, young and enthusiastic. I became an instructor. We had no children, so Joan found an avocation in the little world of academic social life.

"I found solace in the world of ideas. At first it was just my own field of zoology. Naturally Joan disliked my preoccupation with work, but she accepted it because work made me famous in a small way and she shared that prestige.

"Unfortunately the study of animals led me on to the study of the most peculiar animal of all, man himself. I began to read about social anthropology and gradually I became a convert to that primitive form of economic organization we now call 'socialism.' Fifty years ago, when so many demurely respectable Americans were admiring readers of Henry George and Edward Bellamy that wouldn't have mattered. But today, it does matter."

"I can supply the end of that old story," interrupted Urizar. "Your radical economic ideas destroyed your wife's social life and she has never forgiven you."

"No." Harley sighed, again. "It wasn't so simple . . . Her social life is intact, but I have lost my integrity. . . .

"You see, no one knew about my

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ideas. Our friends never discussed economics. I never tried to force my ideas on them. I suspected that I might find myself without funds for these expeditions if my views were known. I was careful to keep my mouth shut.

"Unfortunately there were others who were not so careful. One of these was a young instructor who paraded 'dangerous thoughts' in the classroom. Our trustees fired him. For saying openly what I was thinking privately.

"A few of the students and junior professors supported him. Some of them didn't even believe as he did; but they did believe in his right to voice his ideas. There were meetings and a brief flurried students' strike. A few more instructors were fired, a few students were expelled and—the whole thing blew over. But my peace of mind was gone.

You see, in the midst of the upheaval, I told Joan I wanted to speak at one of their meetings. We had our first violent quarrel. She wept and then—she was taken ill. The doctor called it 'collapse'—nervous indigestion and a weak, fluttering pulse. The pulse worried him. So . . . I withdrew my name as a speaker for that meeting. I told the committee that their ideas were too extreme for me to support conscientiously. That was not true.

"The trouble was that afterward I had to go on living with what I had done. Only I knew the truth. And Joan.

"Unfortunately it is too late to do anything about it now. I lost my chance to stand up and be counted for my principles. I may never have another chance. It's got to the point now where I would like to throw up my professorship and leave Joan forever—go off alone and make a new life for myself. But I can't."

This peculiarly moral dilemma moved Urizar. "Why not?"

"I can answer that in one word," said Harley. "Money. If I had a tidy lump sum, say fifty or a hundred thousand dollars, I could give it to Joan and leave her with a clear conscience. As it is, I haven't anything like that amount. If I threw away everything and cleared out, what would become of her? What sort of life would she have? I can't do it."

The door opened. Joan Harley came into the room, smiling affectionately. "The snake is asleep and seems comfortable. There's no sign of her shedding her skin yet."

"You're sure?"

"I looked through the mesh on both sides. Tomorrow we'll be in New York. Tommy, or one of your other assistants, is sure to meet us at the pier. He can take charge of all your specimens then."

Urizar, sorry for both, said "good night" more soberly than usual and walked forward to the Captain's quarters.

Lindstrom had just come in from the bridge. His long, hard jowl was red from the salt kiss of the wind. Urizar lounged in an armchair, legs stretched out.

Lindstrom sat on a corner of the desk nursing his glass in one hand. "Anything new?"

"Not much." Urizar answered in

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his most reflective voice. "Has it ever occurred to you, Lars, how various and subtle are the temptations offered by money?"

"Such as?"

"A man of ideas who murdered his own peace of mind by sacrificing his integrity to a pampered wife—a man who could escape the whole dreary aftermath and recover a little of his self-respect if he had money. An intelligent mulatto who could leave the United States for a country where there is no color line, without fear of privation and struggle in a foreign land—if he had money."

"Albert Dawson is the mulatto. I suppose the man of ideas is Fabian Harley?"

"Yes. Those are the two people to whom Rupert Lord's money would mean the most."

"You think one of them took it?"

"I think those two had the strongest motives. But we must weigh strength of motive against strength of character. A weaker character might yield to a far less urgent temptation."

"Then whom do you suspect?" asked Lindstrom.

Urizar laughed. "Didn't I tell you it was 'anybody's murder'?"

A knock on the door startled both men out of proportion to its significance. Urizar's laugh died abruptly. Lindstrom set down his glass.

Lindstrom opened the door. "Why, Miss Keyes . . ."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you. I couldn't sleep. I've been walking on deck. I saw your light. And—I've thought of something. I had to tell you right away."

"Won't you sit down?" Lindstrom closed the door. As she subsided in an armchair, he offered her a glass. She refused, but accepted a cigarette from Urizar. He lighted it for her, and saw her narrow, sun-browned hand tremble.

"You're frightened." His voice was quiet. "Why?"

"Can you ask? After what happened to Dr. Harley?" The ember of her cigarette glowed red as she drew on it deeply. "You know what I think now? All these acts of violence come from one person. Rupert was murdered by the same person who murdered Leslie Dawson. That person is on board this ship, among us now, utterly unsuspected. And that person just tried to kill Dr. Harley. Do you expect anyone with any imagination at all to sleep—in that situation?"

"What was it you wanted to tell us?"

"As I walked, I kept thinking about the letter Dawson dictated to me—the letter that could be used in part as a suicide note, and suddenly—I saw the whole thing. The fact that Albert Dawson's wife happened to have an epicene name—Leslie. That must be how Albert Dawson got the idea in the first place."

"I'm beginning to understand," said Urizar.

"I knew you would." Nina turned toward him, eager and almost beautiful in the lamplight; dark eyes shining. "As purser on a ship the Lords used, Dawson knew Rupert carried large sums in cash. So Dawson placed his wife, Leslie, in Rupert's household as a maid to watch until Rupert

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had an unusually large sum in the house. She realized that no one else knew anything about it but Rupert himself. She loosened his saddle girth hoping his death would pass for an accident. Then she and Dawson could take the money without being even suspected of murder or theft.

"But Rupert wasn't killed immediately—he was merely injured and unable to take the money to Washington as he'd planned. He hit on the idea of putting the money in a sealed envelope and entrusting it to me to deliver, without telling me what the envelope contained.

"Leslie Dawson, there as a spy, could have seen Rupert put the money in the envelope and later give me that same envelope. She could have overheard his instructions to me.

"As soon as Dawson's ship came into port, Leslie told him how their plan had miscarried. Dawson saw at once how easy it would be to steal the money from me without being suspected of theft, since I, myself, didn't know I had the money. The Dawsons would have time to disappear with the money before Rupert could learn what had happened.

"Originally I'm sure Dawson intended to share the money with his wife. But suppose they had quarreled? Suppose Dawson had begun to hate his wife? There was just one way he could keep the whole sum of money for himself—Leslie must die. And she must die in such a way that Dawson would not be accused or even suspected of her murder.

"At the same time, he must do something that would make it impossible for me to testify against him when I discovered that Rupert's package of 'blueprints' was missing. Especially if I had chanced to discover that the package did not contain blueprints at all, but a large sum of money."

Lindstrom nodded his big head ponderously. "I'm beginning to see. Two birds . . . ?"

"With one stone!" Nina was radiant in her excitement. "Leslie Dawson and myself. Dawson hit upon an ingenious plan to kill one woman and discredit the other's testimony long enough for him to get away with the money. A plan based on the fact that his wife's first name, 'Leslie,' could be used for either man or woman. By posing as an illiterate gardener he induced me to write a letter for him in my own handwriting, ostensibly signed with his name but actually signed with his wife's name—Leslie Dawson. The letter had to be signed with his wife's name if it were to pass for her suicide note. But while he was dictating it to me, I must suppose it to be a letter signed by a man—the man who was dictating. Dawson couldn't ask me plausibly to sign such a letter with a name as exclusively female as Jane or Margaret. It had to be a name as ambiguous as 'Leslie.'

"Of course the letter was planned to fill two pages, with the second page worded like a suicide note. He had to begin with some salutation and any salutation he could dictate to me would spoil the first page for his purpose."

Lindstrom interrupted. "I still don't see why Dawson should want a sui-

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cide note in one woman's handwriting signed with another woman's name?"

"Only one answer is possible." Nina's crisp voice was almost impatient. "Don't you see it? Now? He planned to kill his wife and leave the suicide note beside her body, a note signed with her name, but in my handwriting.

"At first, any investigator would take the note at face value as a suicide note in Leslie Dawson's handwriting. Dawson would see to it that no specimens of her writing were available at sea.

"And then? Dawson himself, as her husband, would question the handwriting in the alleged suicide note. So the investigator would compare it with the writing of all the other people on board and he would soon see that the note was in my writing. There was even a specimen of my writing handy in Dawson's possession —the traveler's checks I filled out for the Seaman's Home.

"You see what would happen then? Inevitably I would be accused of having forged Leslie Dawson's suicide note and, therefore, of having murdered her, with every likelihood that the thing would drag on for weeks. For who would believe a suspected murderess who tried to explain the evidence against her by telling a fantastic story about an illiterate gardener who dictated a suicide note to her and asked her to sign it with the murdered woman's name?

"Think how fanciful that story would have sounded to you if you had found a suicide note in my writing beside Leslie Dawson's body and if I had not already written a script identifying Dawson as the illiterate gardener *before* Leslie Dawson's death.

"If I were finally convicted of murder—so much the better from Dawson's point of view—that disposed of me forever. If, eventually, I were cleared for lack of other evidence against me, the accusation would have discredited any story I told and kept me far too busy to wonder what had become of Rupert's blueprints or accuse Dawson of stealing them. If I still believed the envelope contained blueprints I might forget it entirely in the excitement of being accused of murder. But if, by any chance, I had learned that the envelope contained money—would my equally fantastic story of how I got that money be believed while I was under suspicion of murder? Especially when Rupert, the only witness who could substantiate my story, was dead?" Nina's voice trailed away in silence.

Lindstrom looked from one to the other dubiously. "This is all very fine but—if Dawson went to all this trouble to get a suicide note in Miss Keyes' writing why didn't he leave it beside Leslie Dawson's body?"

"How could he when she died of snake-bite?" returned Urizar. "Something went wrong with his ingenious plan. Somehow, Medusa intervened."

"And what happened to the money?" persisted Lindstrom.

"Probably destroyed," suggested Nina. "After all, if he kept it in his possession it would have been the

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most damaging evidence against him."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Lindstrom heaved his great length out of the armchair. "The sooner we get this settled the better. We'll take this young lady back to her cabin. And then we'll send for Mister Dawson."

"I don't mind going back alone," protested Nina.

"I'll go with her," suggested Urizar. "While you send for Dawson. I'll be back in a minute.

Lindstrom was pressing the bell beside his desk as they went out the door.

"Bolt your door—please," said Urizar, as they turned into the corridor.

"I'll be sensible." She smiled over her shoulder. "Good night, and thank you."

Urizar paced the deck slowly toward the one lighted porthole—Lindstrom's. He loitered on his way, giving himself a few extra moments to analyze the case against Dawson. It seemed neat — flawless — foolproof. What other explanation could there be of the illiterate gardener and the suicide note?

He was bending his head toward his cupped hand to light a cigarette, when he heard the cry.

It split the air—raucous, ragged, horrible—a scream without age or sex—the demoniac shriek of a damned soul.

Match and cigarette fell to the deck from his unnerved hands. He turned and raced toward the upper lounge. Someone stumbled across the high threshhold into his arms, sobbing and clutching.

"Captain Urizar!"

It was Joan Harley's voice. He could feel her body shake under the impact of each sob.

"Are you hurt?" He tried to hold her at arm's length and look at her.

"No! No! Not me! There!" She broke away from him and pointed down the stairwell.

Urizar ran to the head of the companionway. Below, in the light of a single lamp, huge shadows shifted as the ship rocked. One shadow seemed thicker, more solid. It didn't move with the others.

He hurried below. He could hear Joan Harley's feet pattering close behind him.

A man, in dark jacket and trousers, sprawled prone, arms stretched above his head. He seemed to have leapt or fallen over the balustrade of the stairwell, as Leslie Dawson had fallen.

Urizar heard shouts and running footfalls. He knelt beside the body. No pulse. He turned the man over. There was a deeply depressed fracture on the forehead, filled with blood. The jaw sagged. The man was dead.

Something white lay loosely in the curled fingers of the right hand. Paper—a single sheet of flimsy notepaper. He drew it from the lax grasp, his swift glance devouring the words written upon it.

A switch clicked. Urizar blinked as chandelier and sconces blazed with light. He rose and turned.

"Well, Miguel?" Lindstrom stood by the bulkhead, one hand still on the light switch. "Dead? Who . . . ?"

"Albert Dawson. This note was in

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his hand. I'll read it:

"I cannot stand our separation any longer. This seems to be the only way out. I'm sorry if it causes trouble. You know I love you. Leslie Dawson."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Washington, D. C.
Friday, June 21

Dear Captain Urizar:

I understand the psychology of crime better now than when I wrote the script you read. Now I know that the mere existence of such a testament as that will not give a criminal pause. For in spite of the script and other things I told you and Captain Lindstrom afterward, I have reason to believe that my life is still in danger. It is largely my own fault, I admit—as you will realize when you have read a little further. But I need your help and advice. When you get this letter, please write or come to see me. Perhaps what I have to tell you will throw some light on the death of Leslie Dawson.

How well I remember my premature feelings of relief when the *Santa Cristina* steamed through the Narrows that sultry afternoon in June! customs, Tony fell into step beside me. "Let's share a taxi," he said. "Going to a hotel?"

"No," I answered. "I'm taking a night train to Washington. Penn Station at nine forty-three."

He looked at his watch. "Only quarter of three. You have lots of time. What about an early dinner with me? Then I'll put you on the train."

"Thanks. I have to get to the bank before it closes at four. That's important."

"You mean three."

"No. The Guaranty Trust closes at four."

"All right. We'll stop there first."

Tony pulled the taxi door open. We got inside.

Fifteen minutes later the cab halted before the wide entrance of a tall, solid building. Tony sprang out. I was following automatically when the name embossed on the brass plate caught my eye.

"Tony! This is the National City. My bank is the Guaranty Trust at Fifth and 44th."

"Lord, I am sorry!" Tony's rueful glance was spontaneous and boyish. "This is my own bank. I'm so used to giving this address when I go to 'the bank' I entirely forgot yours was the Guaranty Trust. As a matter of fact, I intended to come here after we left your bank. I really need some cash. As long as we're here—if you'll just wait a minute . . ."

He was gone before I could demur. I called after him: "Please hurry!" He answered with a wave of one hand as he plunged through the doorway.

It was nearly three-thirty when Tony returned. "Please tell the man to hurry," I begged.

Tony leaned forward and tapped on the glass panel that was drawn halfway aside for ventilation. "Forty-fourth and Fifth—as fast as you can make it."

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"O.K." We swung into a crosstown street and found ourselves jammed behind a line of furniture-moving trucks. At last we rushed forward and turned into Fifth. The hands of the big clock in front of the Guaranty Trust pointed to nine minutes after four.

The taxi driver rolled penitent eyes in Tony's direction. "Sorry, boss. That truck . . ."

"You couldn't help it," agreed Tony. "See here, Nina, if it's cash you want, I have a little. I'll give you fifty and you can write me a check." He was holding out the bill.

"Thanks." I took it listlessly.

"What we both need is a tall, cool drink." He sat back in his corner, mopping his forehead with a fine linen handkerchief. "By the time we're through that we can start thinking about dinner."

We had a couple of Tom Collinses and I felt better. Then he suggested the air-conditioned roof of a luxury hotel for dinner.

A silk-padded express elevator whisked us to the Stratosphere Room as the hotel modestly named its penthouse restaurant.

Tony prided himself on having known all the headwaiters in New York since his freshman days at Princeton. Thanks to this, our table was far from the orchestra and the kitchen door, beside a great sheet of plate glass that overlooked Central Park.

"Golly, what a change from that unprintable mudhole, Quisqueya!" Tony raised his Martini as if he were toasting an escape from prison.

"Don't you like it?" It hadn't occurred to me that Tony was unhappy in Quisqueya. He had seemed rather lucky getting that banking job when he left Princeton so precipitately.

"Would you like it?" Tony's eyes pleaded for sympathy.

"I had no idea you felt that way."

"Didn't you?" He laughed harshly. "I could hardly wait until my first vacation rolled around. I made up my mind I'd spend it in New York or bust. Here's to Manhattan!" He drained his glass.

The waiter was hovering. I shook my head, but Tony went right on ordering another round of double Martinis. "I'm going to paint the town red," he announced. "My first night of liberty after a whole year of exile."

"You'll have to do that paint job alone," I reminded him. "My train leaves at nine forty-three."

"Couldn't you take a later train? Come on! Be a sport!"

"You know I couldn't get another reservation at such short notice. Not the way things are today."

"O.K. Skip it. I've other pals in town. I'll give one or two of them a ring."

When the second cocktail appeared I found myself sipping without further protest. It seemed unsually dry and heady and civilized after the monotonously sweet rum drinks of Quisqueya. "Why do you stay there, Tony, if you dislike it so much?"

"It's a job." Tony was selecting hors d'oeuvres.

"About three million unemployed now and more to come," Tony

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sighed over the *foie gras*. "Veterans getting what breaks there are. And I've blotted my copybook. Kicked out of Princeton. If I hadn't been for Rupert, I'd have had a pretty tough time.

"Do you have to stay in Quisqueya all the rest of your life?" I asked.

"Good Lord, no! If I did, I'd shoot myself. I'm to have three years in Quisqueya, then New York or Chicago. At least that was the understanding Rupert had with my boss and I don't suppose Rupert's death will make any difference. One year up and two to go. All I can do is grit my teeth and pray for strength."

"You're a spoiled child grown-up," I said not too kindly.

"Sorry to blow my top like that." His smile was boyishly repentant. "Just the effect of my first night in civilization and two drinkable Martinis."

I was smothering yawns by the time we reached coffee and Benedictine, but Tony wanted to prolong his celebration by taking a turn on the dance floor.

"It's just one minute of nine," I demurred. "My train leaves in forty-four minutes."

"There's plenty of time," he insisted. "We can make Penn Station from here in fifteen minutes."

At nine-twenty, I revolted. "You may stay if you wish. I'm going."

"Oh, all right!" Sullenly, he gave in, tossing a far too generous tip to the waiter and following me to the elevator with dragging steps.

To my surprise he, too, stifled a yawn on the way down. "Maybe I'll paint the town red tomorrow," he grunted. "I do feel done in."

"Going to a hotel?" I asked.

"Gosh, I forgot all about getting a room! Let's try at the desk here."

The room clerk was politely adamant. Sorry. No rooms. No, he couldn't recommend another hotel. The U.N. . . .

Tony plunged into a telephone booth. He didn't bother to shut the door and I heard him make arrangements with his friend "Stinker" to stay over.

"You don't have to take me to the station," I protested, furious at the delay.

"Yes, I do."

The doorman spotted us as we approached. He whistled up a taxi without waiting to ask if we wanted one. His smile, like the headwaiter's, was the smile of an old friend. Tony handed him a dollar bill.

"If you knew how often I've taken myself to stations alone," I went on.

Tony answered in a loud voice, a little slurred by alcohol. "But not when you were carrying so much money."

I caught my breath. "Hush!" I whispered, looking at the driver's back. "Please, Tony."

His voice sank. It was just audible. "So you do have the money. And now you're taking it to Washington as Rupert told you to."

"How did you know?"

"You were so upset when you found the bank was closed. And yet you could have raised cash from a dozen people in New York besides me. So that couldn't be what you

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went to the bank for. You were going to ditch the money there. Weren't you?"

"Of course. I wanted to get rid of it. I wanted to put it where it couldn't injure me or anyone else. Then I was going to see Rupert's man in Chevy Chase at the appointed time and tell him where it was."

"Did you lie to me? And to Lindstrom and Urizar? Have you had the money all along?"

"Of course not. Why should I?"

"Then how did you get it back? And when?"

"The night the purser was killed. I heard Joan Harley scream when she saw his body in the lower lounge. I ran out of my cabin into the upper lounge. Below I could hear her gabbling hysterically to Urizar. The money was up where I was, near the head of the companionway. I recognized it by the pink and gold wrapping paper. I suppose the purser dropped it when he fell over the balustrade."

"But—where the devil was it hidden when Urizar's police searched the ship?"

"I didn't stop to think about that. I picked it up and went back to my cabin. I didn't tell anyone, even you, because I wanted to take it to Rupert's man."

"Why?"

I clenched both hands in my lap. "It isn't easy to explain. You'll say I'm sentimental. But . . . it was the last thing Rupert asked me to do for him, so I want to do it."

"You were in love with Rupert." It was a flat statement.

"Perhaps." For all my efforts at self-command, my voice wavered.

"And you'd rather give it to this man, as Rupert wished, than turn it over to Amanda?"

"I suppose so." That was better. My voice was almost level. "I suppose I'm jealous of Amanda."

The cab swung around a corner. The great, gray station loomed before us, enormous in the shadows above the street lamps.

"Tony!" I grabbed his arm.

"What's wrong?"

"The clock!"

It was a clock limned in neon lights above the door of a small restaurant. The hands pointed to one minute after ten.

"I've missed my train."

"You'll get another." Tony's voice was reassuring. But I wasn't reassured.

My memory of the next ten minutes is blurred as the memory of a dream. The weary indifference of the clerk. "No Pullman. No reserved seats for tonight or tomorrow. If you go day coach you may have to stand all the way to Washington. Yes, I suppose you might try B. and O."

I was so stunned that Tony took over. "I'll telephone." But even his crisp assurance had wilted when he came out of the booth. "Royal Blue tomorrow morning. Best I could do."

"I suppose I could stand all the way to Washington tonight . . ." I began.

"No, you couldn't. You look half dead. And with what you're carrying . . ."

"There were no rooms at that hotel," I went on. "I suppose we could try another . . ."

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"I have a better idea." He took something out of his pocket—a flat Yale key. "Rupert gave it to me. The key to his New York house. Told me to stay there if I couldn't get a room in a hotel. If only I'd remembered that I wouldn't have had to call old Stinker! Come on! It's the thing for you."

I looked at him in amazement. "You mean I'd be alone in an empty house?"

"Of course not. There's a caretaker. A woman. It's perfect. I'll stay in the house, too, if you like."

"And disappoint your friend Stinker?"

"Oh." He frowned. "I'd rather not do that. And you'll be just as safe without me—much safer than in a hotel."

Outside the station, our cab was still waiting. Tony gave the driver the address of Rupert's house in the East Seventies.

Rupert's house stood in a quiet street between the high, blank wall of a museum garden and the lower wall of a clubhouse terrace. It was brownstone—tall, narrow, antiquated. There were no steps. The door was solid wood, painted black.

As Tony touched the bell I said: "Where's your key?"

"I don't want to scare the caretaker out of her wits," he explained.

"Does she stay here all alone when the house is empty?"

"Why not? It makes her feel she's earning the little pension Rupert gives her. And there's a watchman employed by all the householders in this block to wander around outside at night. He's pretty old for the job, but I suppose he could call the police if anything went wrong."

The door was too thick for us to hear approaching footsteps. It opened suddenly—about six inches.

"Well?" A harsh voice spoke from darkness. "What do you want?"

"Good evening, Martha." Tony was at his most ingratiating.

"Oh, it's you, sir." The voice acknowledged recognition grudgingly. "I didn't hear the bell at first. I'm a wee bit hard of hearing these days."

"This is Miss Keyes who has been staying with Mrs. Lord in Quisqueya," went on Tony. "She's going to spend the night here before going on to Washington. Mr. Lord gave me his latchkey but I rang so you wouldn't be startled by our walking in on you."

The door swung wide. I remembered Martha though I hadn't seen her for years—a cook employed by Rupert's mother long ago. Her face, once round and pink, was gray and haggard now.

"Evenin', miss." Pink-rimmed eyes of a watery blue swerved to Tony. "You staying here, too?" Martha's tone put the worst construction on that possibility.

"Oh, no," I rejoined hastily. "Mr. Brooke was kind enough to bring me here but he's going to stay with a friend."

Tony carried my overnight bag inside. We had checked my other luggage at the station.

"You'll be occupying the west room?" suggested Martha.

"Yes, if that's convenient." It hap-

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pened to be the guest room I had occupied when I stayed there in winter.

"I'll see about sheets." She turned and shuffled up the stairs in her felt-soled bedroom slippers. I waited until she was out of sight. Then I said:

"I don't like it."

"What do you mean?"

"Something lonely and almost sinister about a town house empty in summer. I believe I'd be better off at a hotel."

"Quit worrying. In any hotel you'd run the risk of sneak thieves."

"If I were a sneak thief I'd rather break into a house closed for the summer where there was no one but a woman caretaker, old and deaf."

"O.K. If it'll make you any happier I'll go all over the house before I leave you here with Martha."

I looked at Tony, but the faint light masked his face in shadow.

"Do you mean . . . it's possible that someone is hiding in here? Now?"

"It was your idea—a sneak thief breaking in. I think it most unlikely, but the only way to make sure is to find out. Then you can sleep in peace. Why don't you go upstairs and start to unpack? I'll let you know when I've been over the house. And then I'll clear out. Here's Rupert's front-door key. In case you need it. You can leave it with Martha when you go."

"Thanks, Tony. Sorry to be such a nuisance."

I took the key and climbed the stairs, physically tired and mentally tense—a dreadful combination. In the upper hall, a table lamp was lighted and the door of the west room stood open, held in place with an old-fashioned doorstop—a hunk of lead, molded and painted to look like a white-and-gold filigree basket filled with violets and green leaves.

The furnishings were as Victorian as the house itself. Gaunt chairs and chiffonier of old black walnut that suited the narrow, high-ceiled room. A hardwood floor so old its parquetry had warped a little for all its sleek, blond polish. The standard fireplace of old Manhattan—black grate under white marble mantelpiece with brass andirons. The door, like those downstairs, was solid walnut with a silver knob, and—just so there could be no doubt at all that this was an old-fashioned house—there was a transom above the door. I opened it as well as the window. I needed all the air I could get.

It was a relief to throw off shoes and girdle. While I was undressing, I heard Tony's footfalls and the sound of doors opening and shutting. I heard him go into the room next door, then into the rooms across the hall. Finally the steps receded toward the back stair, and then I heard him overhead, on the third floor. The chandelier quivered under his tread in the room above and I caught a murmur of voices. That must be Martha's room. Now Tony's footfalls were coming nearer again—down the stair, along the hall.

His voice sang out cheerfully: "Inspection finished! All present and correct!"

I flung a dressing gown over py-

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jamas and opened my door, a cigarette in one hand, a book in the other. "No skeletons in the cupboard? No burglars under the bed? Thanks," I smiled. "I really shall sleep better for your going over the house."

"You're perfectly safe," he insisted. "Anyone who tried to break in would make so much noise you'd waken. The telephone extension in Amanda's room is working, so you could call the police, without going downstairs. A prowl car would get here in two minutes or less. If you need me, Stinker's number is Regent 6-1098. I'd enjoy your waking him at four A.M."

"You're an angel, Tony," I said with real gratitude. "I couldn't be so safe anywhere else. You know, I can hardly realize that it's nearly over. That in twenty-four hours I'll be rid of this accursed money."

"You poor kid! I'll come around at eight tomorrow," he went on. "We'll have breakfast together and I'll put you on the train. Just in case someone makes a last grab at the money before you leave New York. By the way—you're quite sure you still have the money with you?"

I nodded. "Quite sure."

"So long!" Tony waved a hand and grinned.

I left the lamp lighted in the upper hall and went back to my own room. I shut the door and looked for a key to lock it. There was none.

Unexpectedly a faint fragrance of roses came through the open window. I looked that way. A square of light from the window above mine was thrown on the side wall of the club house next door. Martha was still awake. And, of course, it was the club-house garden, two stories below my window, that accounted for the roses. I was still looking at the wall when Martha's light went out.

After reading one paragraph, my eyelids began to droop irresistibly. It was an effort of will to crush my cigarette in the ashtray and snap off the reading lamp. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply of the rose-scented air. In another moment my waking consciousness would slip out of my body as smoothly as a ship gliding out of its moorings into calm waters . . .

Suddenly, I was wide awake, sitting up in the dark, one hand curled into a fist against my racing heart. The only thing I could see was the faint radiance from a street lamp, reflected on the wall beyond the window. But I could hear.

It was not a loud sound. It came only once. Silence preceded and followed it. But it was unmistakable. The sound of a foot that trips and stumbles on a stair, stamping just in time to maintain balance. It was the dry, hard impact of a leather sole and heel on the stairway just outside my bedroom door.

I don't know how long I lay there, listening for another stumble, or, at least, another step. None came.

Gradually, the fear that had overwhelmed me for a few moments began to ebb away in a sluggish tide. For the sound was not repeated, and surely anyone ransacking the house would have made some other noise by this time. But I was no longer

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drowsy. I was teased by the mystery of the sound I had heard and I knew that I shouldn't be able to sleep until I had identified its source.

I slid my feet to the floor, groping for the velvet-soled slippers I had left beside the bed, and slid my arms into my thin silk dressing gown. The faint light from the window gleamed on a nickel-plated flashlight I had used on Quisqueya's dark roads. I snapped it on, covering the lens with one hand, so the light was localized and feeble—just enough for me to see my immediate vicinity without casting long beams and shadows ahead of me.

I crossed the room to the door and turned the knob. There was a faint click. I waited—perhaps a full minute. No other sound came in response from the stairwell where I thought I had heard a step falter. How long ago? An hour, half an hour, ten minutes? I didn't know.

My breathing quickened as I pushed the door open.

The window at the front of the hall, opposite the stair, let in the ghostly light of moon and street lamp. Something was different, but what? My wits, numb with fear, moved sluggishly to the obvious conclusion. The last time I had seen this upper hall I had not noticed the light from outside the window because there was a warmer, brighter light from a lamp inside, on the table—the lamp I had left burning. Since then someone had turned it out.

I crossed the hall to the table and threw the lamp switch. There was a snap, but no light came. So that was it. The bulb was dead. It didn't matter. I had my flashlight. And yet—a light in the hall had been comforting. If only I knew where to find a fresh bulb. . . .

There must be a store of new bulbs somewhere on this floor or the one above. Martha would know. I wanted that hall light so badly by this time that I decided to ask her for a bulb, even if I had to wake her. I could make it up to her in the morning. I'd give her an extra big tip.

I went down the hall to the back stairs, an enclosed, spiral staircase. The flight leading to the servants' rooms on the top floor was shabbier than the other stair. I stopped at the door of the room above mine. I tapped lightly on the door. No response. I rapped more loudly. Still no response.

"Martha!" My voice sounded unnatural in my own ears. There was a break between the two syllables as if a taut thread of sound had snapped in two under strain. I tried the knob. The door yielded.

I stepped into a room the same size and shape as my own, but it was darker because it was farther above the street light and a smaller window excluded the moon. I could just see the dingy brown window sill and the faint glimmer of a white counterpane—nothing more.

"Martha . . ." I turned my flashlight beam on the bed. It was empty.

I found a wall switch and pressed it. The room sprang into sharp definition as light blazed overhead. I had a fleeting impression of neglect. But there was no sign of Martha.

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I left the light burning and went out, closing the door softly behind me. When I came to second-floor landing, I paused. Could Martha have gone down to the kitchen to get a cup of tea or hot milk? I looked down the enclosed stairwell into the black void beyond my flashlight beam and called softly: "Martha!" No answer. I went on, down the winding stair.

As I rounded the last curve I saw the door to the basement kitchen standing open. Dim light came from a barred kitchen window at street level. There was an armchair near the window. A shapeless figure huddled there, motionless.

"Martha . . ." I played my flashlight beam over the chair. Still she didn't move. I crossed the room and turned the light directly on her face.

I will never forget that moment as long as I live. Again my wits were numb, moving sluggishly. At first I thought: *She's sleeping very soundly.* Then: *What is it that glitters so in the light?* I leaned closer. It was Martha's eyes that shone so brilliantly where the light glanced off the white curve of the eyeballs. Then, suddenly and awfully, I knew that Martha was dead.

I groped for a pulse in her thin, sinewy wrist. There was none.

I looked for some sign of the cause of death. There was no mark or bruise I could see.

A natural death from heart failure? She was old enough and yet . . .

Martha's death might be accident, but the situation was too much for me. I could not spend the rest of the night alone in the house with a dead body. Should I call the police? I didn't relish any further contact with the police while I had Rupert's money with me. If there was anything suspicious about Martha's death I would be questioned closely—I might even be searched. If, as you once hinted, Capt. Urizar, Rupert was involved in some shady transaction, I might be implicated if the police discovered Rupert's money. Now Rupert was dead he couldn't clear me.

I felt horribly alone, incapable of decision. I needed advice. I determined to call Tony. What was the number he had given? Regent 6-1098. And he had said the extension in Amanda's room was working.

I went up the backstairs, down the hall to the room opposite my own and switched on the lights. Beside the bed I found the telephone on a small table. That dial telephone, with its French handset in white enamel, was the one modern touch. I lifted and listened for the dial tone. None came.

I jiggled the lever in the cradle. Still no sound. Was it a portable telephone, unplugged? My eyes followed the white cord. It was portable. It was unplugged. The plug of white plastic lay about two inches from the baseboard. And it had been crushed into a dozen fragments, as if someone had stepped on it.

I forgot the flashlight I had laid on Amanda's bed when I picked up the telephone. I ran across the hall into my own room. I shut the door softly.

Just then came a slight creaking sound. I waited, listening to the still-

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ness, eyes on my watch. One minute —two minutes—still no other sound. Yet I had a feeling that, this time, I was cornered. Unless . . . I might bluff my way out, first hiding the money. But where?

Inspiration came.

I snatched the scissors from my suitcase and hacked at the lining of my blue fox jacket. The lining ripped across its whole width as I dragged the package through the slit I had made. That was how I had got the money through the customs—between the fur and lining of this fox jacket. I was able to support the weight of the package in the curve of my arm and the jacket was so bulky and shapeless that no one had noticed any difference in it.

I went to the desk, printed my name and my Washington address on the wrapping paper. There was a book of three-cent stamps in a pigeonhole. I had no idea how much the package weighed. I pasted every stamp in the book to it and wrote *Airmail. Special Delivery.* Then I leaned far out the window. The club house garden was still sunk in its well of darkness. I drew back my right hand and threw the package with all the force I could muster. It spun in a wide curve, just skimming the top of the wall, before it disappeared into the darkness below.

The steward of such a club would be trustworthy. If he found the package he would assume it had been dropped by some member of the club. He would mail it. If a member found the package, he would assume the same thing and act the same way. It should reach my address in Washington at the same time I did, tomorrow afternoon. Providing I left this house tomorrow morning . . .

The hands of my watch pointed to half past two. By five, it would be dawn. And the door was solid walnut. Why not barricade myself in this room and endure the siege for the next two and a half hours? Wasn't that wiser than running the gauntlet down dark stairs to the lower hall, where I would have to stop and fumble at the lock of the front door before finding doubtful sanctuary in a deserted street?

I pushed the bureau in front of the door. I got back into bed, and picked up my book. Two and a half hours till dawn. If only I could keep my mind on what I was reading for two and a half hours. Dawn would bring the milkman and a few casual passers-by on their way to jobs that started early. With daylight and people, my courage would come back . . .

Every now and then I would glance at my watch and note that another ten minutes had slipped away without anything happening. I had absurd faith that time was on my side. Gently, insidiously, my assurance crept back to me until I even chided myself for the panic that had made me toss the package out the window.

It was about ten minutes after three now. I was fairly absorbed in my book, an old novel of Walpole's, when an odd little sense of uneasiness stole into the back of my mind. It was the vague feeling of discomfort you get when someone else is staring at you in a bus or restaurant.

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But why should I feel that way now? Alone in an empty room, with a barricaded door?

Reluctantly I raised my eyes from the book—just to make sure the room was empty. There was no one within my range of vision.

I looked at the book again but its pages could no longer hold my attention. I shifted my position restlessly and raised my eye a little higher. Now I was looking directly into the round, old-fashioned mirror that hung over the mantlepiece, opposite both door and bed.

For an instant my heart felt heavy and inanimate as a stone. Then it shuddered and began to throb. Now, at last, I knew how Martha had died.

For, as I looked into the mirror, I was looking at a reflection of the transom, high above the tall, old-fashioned door. I had forgotten all about the transom. I had left it open. And now, framed in that opening was a face—blank and unsmiling as a graven mask.

It was the last face in the world I had expected to encounter in such circumstances — the one passenger from the *Santa Cristina* whom I had not visualized on the stair when I heard that first stumbling step.

It was the face of Tony Brooke.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I WRENCHED MY EYES AWAY from the mirror and looked over my shoulder at the transom. Tony's face was still there, his features immobile as clay. But as my eyes moved, his moved to meet mine. Then he spoke.

"Don't be frightened. I won't harm you."

I was annoyed. Had I shown fear so plainly? "What do you want?" My voice sounded hoarse.

"You know what I want. Are you going to open the door? Or shall I have to break this transom?"

I got out of bed, sliding my feet into slippers, cinching the belt of my dressing gown snugly about my waist. There was nothing to be afraid of, I told myself. This was no dangerous crook, no enigmatic stranger. This was Tony Brooke whom I had known ever since he was a baby.

As I pushed the bureau away from the door, I heard him drop lightly to his feet on the floor outside. I opened the door. He had been standing on a chair. Now he thrust it aside and came into the room. I took a step backward. He shut the door and swung around to face me, hands in pockets.

My fox jacket was lying on a chair where I had tossed it. His glance took in the ripped lining. "So that's how you got it through the customs." Even his voice was deeper, harsher. "Where is it?"

"Where is—what?" I was trying to gain time.

"Don't play with me!" he snapped. "I don't want to harm you in any way but—I must have that money."

"Oh, Tony!" I dropped on the edge of the bed, clenching my hands together. "Why? You don't need it. You know you don't."

"That's what you think. I've been

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after that money from the beginning. I was handicapped because I hoped to get it without your suspecting me. I hoped you would never know who had taken it. And—I didn't want to use force . . . Even now I don't want to use force but—I will if I have to."

"Don't be melodramatic!" I said sharply. "This is silly."

"Silly?" He repeated the word tonelessly as if he didn't know its meaning. "You don't take me seriously, do you? That's why you let me into this room just now. I'm not dangerous. Perhaps if I tell you the whole story from the beginning you'll understand that I'm in earnest. That I mean business. That first day in your cabin I urged you to entrust the money to the purser because I thought you would let me take it to the purser for you. Then I could have kept it and told you that it had been stolen from me on the way.

"When Dawson's wife stole your wallet and Dawson took up that cash collection, hoping you'd have to produce some of Rupert's money, thereby revealing where it was hidden, I tried to help them force your hand by pretending I had no cash to lend you. Remember how I begged you to let me keep the money for you that night on the hurricane deck? But you wouldn't even tell me where it was hidden! I didn't dare to search for it after that police officer came on board—Urizar. But I knew that whoever had the money would have to take it ashore when we docked, so I watched the passengers debark. You were the only one that looked apprehensive. And you were pretty eager to get to a bank. I took a chance on your having the money and stuck to you.

"Of course I delayed you deliberately so you didn't get to the bank until after it closed. And I prolonged your dinner so you would miss your train. Again it was I who dissuaded you from standing up all night in a daycoach or going to a hotel. This house of Rupert's was ideal for my purpose because it was an empty house in a quiet street and the only caretaker was slightly deaf.

"All evening I've been playing the comedy role of the ingenuous young Tony still hoping I could get the money without your ever knowing or suspecting who had taken it. I don't know anyone called 'Stinker'. I invented him so you would think of me as being somewhere else if you heard a noise in this house after I was supposed to have gone. The telephone number I gave you as his was picked at random. But you couldn't have called that or any other number for I smashed every extension plug here when I was supposed to be searching the house."

Tony smiled unpleasantly. "When I slammed the door you couldn't see me from where you were standing, so I let the lock snap but—I remained inside.

"Then you've been in the house all night?"

"Of course. When I heard your bedroom door close I waited half an hour, hoping you'd fall asleep. Then I started up the back stairs on tiptoe. But near the top, I stumbled. Did you hear me? I was afraid you

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would. I slipped off my shoes, so you wouldn't hear me again, and went into the nearest bedroom. I waited there about twenty minutes. Nothing happened. Apparently you hadn't heard me. But that room was so near yours I scarcely dared to move or even breathe. So I went down the back stairs to the kitchen where I could sit down and relax until you had time to fall asleep."

"You went down the back stairs to the kitchen . . ." My voice quavered. "Tony, do you know that Martha is—dead?"

"Yes. She always had a weak heart. But I didn't kill her. Truly, I didn't."

"What happened?"

"She must have heard me stumble. While I was holding my breath in that bedroom, she must have gone down the back stairs to the kitchen to investigate. When I came down the back stairs to the kitchen it was dark and she was standing in front of that armchair, reaching for the light switch. She must have just entered the room. I had turned off my flashlight. She couldn't see my face clearly enough to recognize me in that dim light from the kitchen window."

"And then?"

Tony sighed. "She just saw a man, moving furtively, in stocking feet—an unknown man stealing into her kitchen in the middle of the night. That was a shock. And it killed her. She didn't scream. She just made a sort of choking noise and collapsed in the armchair. Nina, I didn't mean for her to die. I did know she had a weak heart, but I didn't know she had gone down to that kitchen. Why are you looking at me like that? You aren't really afraid of me—are you?"

Tony had paused in his pacing. "You know I've always liked you. You know I don't want to harm you. All I want is that money."

The money that was no longer in the house.

I had to divert his mind from it somehow. Words forced their way through my shaking lips—incautious words that I should have checked if I'd had time to think. "Tony—what about the purser? And his wife? Did they—have weak hearts, too?"

"So that's it." His lips shut in the hard, unfamiliar line that changed his whole face into the face of a stranger. "Will you believe me if I say I haven't the slightest idea how either of them died?"

"It's pretty hard to believe that now, isn't it?"

"I'm as innocent of their deaths as I was of Rupert's riding accident," he said vehemently. "Any one of several people may have suspected that Rupert had that cash, and was going to transport it to America. His bankers, his guests, his servants,—any one of them."

I echoed one phrase: "His bankers—Tony, was that you?"

He laughed again. "Why do you think I sailed on the same ship with you? Did you really think I didn't know about the money until I saw it in your cabin?"

My wits churned furiously. "So Rupert used your bank in Quisqueya?"

"Of course. He had the largest account. That was one reason he was

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able to get me a job down there."

"And you knew about the money before I did?"

"I knew he'd withdrawn it from his account. I knew he couldn't spend it in Quisqueya. And I knew he wasn't sending it by draft or cable to New York because he would have done that through the bank. His accident made me suspect that someone was trying to prevent his taking that money to America. I concluded he was sending it to America by some friend whom he could trust. He had only one close friend who was going to America in a few days—you. So I got a cabin on your ship. There was just one thing I didn't foresee—that he wouldn't tell you what you were carrying in that package."

"Then it wasn't just luck that you came into my cabin while the money was on the couch?"

"Of course not. I was keeping an eye on you. The fact that I liked you complicated the situation."

"What did you do after Martha died?"

"I made one last effort to spare you, Nina. I waited a long time at the head of the back stair—watching your transom for the light to go out. Hoping I might slip in and find the money while you were asleep. But your light kept burning. You didn't go to sleep. Then I began to see how soft I was. Why should I take so much trouble to spare your feelings?

"At last I came down the hall and tried your door," he was saying. "It wouldn't budge. I got a chair to look through the transom and—here we are."

At that moment I was speechless.

"Well? Where is the money? I've given you plenty of time to make up your mind. Are you going to tell me?"

I found voice at last. "Why, Tony? You have youth, health, a job with prospects. Some day you'll inherit your father's money. Why do you want this?"

"I need sixty-one thousand in cash now. You can keep the rest if you like. No one will ever know."

"What do you want with sixty-one thousand?" I asked.

An uneven smile slid up one side of Tony's face, giving him a rakish look I had never seen in him before. "In about three days the auditors are going to find the bank is short sixty-one thousand dollars in American money."

"Tony, you took it?"

"'Embezzled' is the legal term. You might say borrowed. I speculated. If I'd won, I could have repaid the bank and pocketed a profit without anyone knowing. It happens all the time. About one in ten gets caught. I'm that one—unless I can get sixty-one thousand in forty-eight hours."

"Why on earth did you take such a risk? When you didn't have to?"

Tony looked at the toes of his boots. "There was a woman. I wanted money for her. Hell, I told you I was bored to death in Quisqueya. I had to do something."

"Wouldn't your father give you sixty-one thousand? Now—to save you from jail?"

Tony shook his head. "I'm not

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sure he could raise so much cash in such a short time, and after that Princeton business he said it was the last time he'd buy me out of a mess."

"You mean a woman scrape?"

"Yes . . . Only it was a girl. The baby was stillborn so everything turned out all right," he added cheerfully. "Dad stumped up with quite a lot of money and I didn't have to marry her."

He was prowling around the room again. "I must have that sixty-one thousand, Nina. Tonight. So I can take a plane to Quisqueya tomorrow morning. There's a plane that leaves La Guardia at nine-three—the last plane that will get the money to the bank in time. I've already reserved a seat. If I miss that plane I'll go to jail or be a fugitive all the rest of my life. Where is it?"

I thought of that package lying in the darkness of the club-house garden, two stories below the open window. What would he do when I told him that he was so near and yet so far from the one thing that could save him? He had killed Martha. . . .

"Are you going to give it to me? Or . . ."

I tried to smile but the muscles of my face felt stiff and cold. "Or else . . . ?"

He grinned, but only with his lips.

"Let's make sure it's intact." I was surprised at the steadiness of my own voice. "I haven't counted it since that first evening on shipboard and a good deal has happened since then. You'll find it under the clothes, at the bottom of my bag. The overnight bag. On the rack."

"A-a-ah!" There was something rapacious, almost animal in that cry. Tony darted at the suitcase. I crossed the room to his side.

"It's all there. Here, let me help you . . ."

His hands were trembling so that he fumbled and clawed at the lid without getting it open. He stood back as I dropped on one knee, undid a hasp that had caught itself and pushed up the lid.

"Let me!"

He sprang forward as I raised the lid. I remained as I was, crouching on one knee. Tony bent over the neatly packed suitcase. Both hands snatched at the underclothes on top and flung them over his shoulder. I bit my lip to keep from laughing and realized that I was on the edge of hysteria.

I went on talking—saying anything that came into my head in order to soothe and distract him with the sound of my voice. "I wouldn't have packed so carefully if I'd known you would unpack my things as soon . . ." Without turning my head away from him, my hand stole along the floor behind me, groping blindly. At last my fingertips closed over something smooth and cool. I lifted my arm cautiously, bending the elbow, bringing the hand that clutched the weight against my waist, higher and higher, up to the level of my shoulder. My eyes were on Tony. If he were to turn his head too soon . . .

A long evening slip, folded at the bottom of the bag, was hurled over his shoulder. His frantic, predatory hands clawed among the trivia that

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remained—an extra jar of cold cream, a pile of handkerchiefs, a manicure set in a blue leather case. Suddenly the hands were still . . .

"You devil! It's not here!"

His head turned slowly to face me. In a split fraction of a second I saw surprise give way to a shading of suspicion in his eyes. And in that same split fraction of a second, I let him have it with all my strength between the eyes. Violet and green, white and gold flashed in the lamplight as the enameled lead of the doorstop struck his forehead. It clattered to the floor. I saw a stain on the white and gold, a sticky stain of dark red. Tony crashed forward on his face and lay still, unconscious.

I dressed in less than two minutes. I threw everything back into the suitcase pell-mell. I picked up the suitcase and ran down the stair. In a moment I had the front door open. I stepped outside and shut the door, hearing the click of the Yale lock snap into place. The street was bathed in the ghastly gray light of dawn.

I left the suitcase on the sidewalk and went to the club house next door. I put my finger on the doorbell and held it there.

It must have been three minutes before the door opened. An old man in gown and slippers blinked at me sleepily.

I had a five-dollar bill in my hands and a visiting card. I spoke rapidly. "I'm sorry to disturb you so early. A package containing a mortgage and other papers fell into your garden from the open window of the house next door. This five dollars is yours if you can find the package now and give it to me. It's wrapped in pale pink paper, about six inches by eight, stamped and addressed to me. Here is my card with my name and address."

"Very well, miss. I'll see if I can find it."

He shut the door. I waited impatiently. Suppose Tony should come out of the Lords' house while I was still standing here on the steps of the house next door? The door opened again. I breathed a sigh of relief. The man was carrying my package.

"Here you are, Miss."

"Thank you." I gave him the five-dollar bill. I put the package in my suitcase and walked the short distance to Fifth Avenue.

I was in luck. Halfway down the block a cab wheeled to the curb. I sank back on cushions of imitation leather and realized that I hadn't slept all night. "B. and O. Bus Terminal," I gasped.

"That's kinda funny." The driver spoke without turning around, as if he were addressing his remark to the instruments on the dashboard.

"What's funny?" I asked sleepily.

The driver spotted a cop and so halted for the next red light. "If I didn't know that such things don't happen to nice young women like you, I'd say that that blue 1947 Buick with the white-walled tires had been following us ever since we left the Seventies."

I was no longer sleepy. My fingers shook so that I dropped a quarter when I paid the cab driver. Perhaps

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someone had followed Tony and me ever since we left the *Santa Cristina.*

"Anything wrong?" The cabman was eyeing me curiously.

"No, nothing wrong." I followed a porter who was already carrying my bag across the sidewalk. We went through a ticket office, down a corridor to the B. and O. waiting room on the other side of the building.

My tension relaxed sufficiently for me to look at the headlines of a morning paper someone had left on the seat beside me. In China, there was a battle; in Indonesia, a riot. In the Wanasook Valley, flood had just destroyed property of greater total value than the cost of building a federal dam there. And, in Washington, the Stiles Committee had disqualified a bill to appropriate funds for such a dam in the Wanasook Valley, by a vote of five to four, Chairman Jefferson Stiles casting the deciding vote.

An attendant herded us through a glass door to a covered drive where a fleet of busses waited. I glanced over my shoulder. Still there was no face I knew.

En route the busses separated from each other. I relaxed in my seat. Except for Tony, everyone who had been on the *Santa Cristina* believed that I was going to Washington by way of the Pennsylvania road. No one would think of looking for me here—unless someone had been following me ever since I left the ship. Every moment that passed made this seem more unlikely.

The bus pulled up at the Hotel Vanderbilt to pick up another passenger—I didn't get a good look at her as she got on, for the wide brim of her hat hid her face. Afterward, she took one of the seats ahead of me, so that her back was toward me. But I saw enough of her to admire her dress and figure.

On the ferry some of the out-of-town passengers left the bus to stare at the harbor. As the sight was no novelty to me, I stayed in the bus. So did the woman in black. I lost track of her in the scramble from bus to train at the Jersey terminal.

Seat 23, Car D was my reservation.

The porter put my suitcase on the rack. I tipped him and sank into a comfortable armchair. I must use this train trip to rest as much as possible. I took off my gloves and put them in my handbag. I took off my hat and hung it on the arm of my chair. I lowered the adjustable back of the seat a few notches, so that I could lean back. The seats were in pairs; my own, next the window. I heard the aisle seat beside me creak as someone sat down. There was the faint snap of a closing purse. A soft Negro voice said: "Thank you, ma'am."

So it was a woman. I was not afraid of any other woman. My hands relaxed a little, holding the handbag more loosely. I would take one good look at her and then let myself doze off. I opened my eyes. I turned my head.

Instantly I recognized the tan skin and dull black dress of the woman who had boarded the bus at the Vanderbilt. Her head was half turned toward the aisle. Again the wide brim of her hat hid her profile. All

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I could see was a sun-browned neck, round and youthful. I was close enough now to see that it was not a lotion but a real sun-tan that bespoke several months on the beach somewhere under a hot sun. Joan Harley, the only other woman aboard the *Santa Cristina,* had no such tan as that.

My eyelids were drooping again when, suddenly, she spoke.

"Well? I'm waiting. What have you done with the package?"

I sat mute, too shocked to move.

She turned her head. Under the bold dip and sweep of that black hat, I was looking at the brown face and smooth, ash-blonde hair of Amanda Lord.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"AMANDA—HOW DID YOU GET HERE?"

"Plane, of course. I passed your ship at sea. I tried to meet her yesterday when she docked, but my taxi was held up by traffic. By the time I got there, you had gone. I drove straight to Penn station, hoping to catch you before you boarded your train last night, but you never came to take up your reservation. I called half the hotels in New York last night trying to find you. Then I remembered you always went to Washington by the Royal Blue during the war. If you had missed your other train, I felt sure you'd take this one this morning. I called the ticket office and asked if there was a reservation in your name. There was and as the seat next to yours was still vacant, I took it."

"Where were you last night?" I asked.

"Driving from one hotel to another, trying to find you. I took a room for myself at the last one I visited—about the tenth on my list."

"Why didn't you go to your own house?"

"I had my reasons."

"Were you driving a blue Buick? With white-walled tires?"

"No." Her tawny eyes were blank, as if the description of the car meant nothing to her. "All this is unimportant. You know why I'm here. I want that package of Rupert's. It's mine now."

I managed to stammer: "You know—what's in it?"

"Of course." Amanda's lips clamped the cigarette.

"Then you know more than I did when Rupert handed it to me," I said bitterly. "I was just supposed to be the—the sucker who carried the package."

Her eyes glittered with malicious amusement. "How like Rupert! I should never have thought of a trick like that. But he loved to use people for his own ends without letting them realize they were being used."

"Rupert . . ." I repeated his name stupidly. "I'm sorry, Amanda. About Rupert. I heard it on the ship's radio."

"You're sorry?" The golden eyes narrowed. "I'm not. I hated him."

"You . . .?" I was too startled to go on.

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"Didn't you ever guess that?" She leaned her head against the tall back of her seat, crushing the hat brim under her neck. "When I first met Rupert I was—dazzled. He had something. Call it 'glamour' in the old, Celtic sense—an optical illusion induced by enchantment or what we call suggestion nowadays. I got over it a few weeks after our marriage and there I was—with Rupert on my hands."

"He was very generous to you."

"Generous? Oh, no. Rupert lavished presents on me—jewels and clothes which advertised his prowess as a money-getter. I had a lot of charge accounts. But one thing I was always short of—cash. My little allowance barely kept me in cigarettes and postage stamps. Why? Because cash is liberty. Rupert would give his dependents anything but that one thing—freedom. He liked to pamper people but he wanted them to feel dependent on him for the pampering—the way you treat a Persian cat.

"I wracked my brains to think of some way I could get that money from you before you left Quisqueya, but I couldn't. So then I decided to take a plane and meet you in New York. I told Rupert that I had to see my dentist in New York—emergency case. He chartered a private plane for me just before he died.

"And then—things began to go wrong. I got word of Rupert's death by radio while I was in the air. No one but Rupert knew where I'd gone, so the broadcaster said something silly about my having 'disappeared.' That meant police might be looking for me, in New York. That's why I went to a hotel last night instead of going to my own house. I didn't want any contact with the police until I had got hold of that money."

"But now Rupert is dead all his money is yours automatically," I put in. "You'll have his whole estate."

"No." She dropped her cigarette stub on the floor and stamped on it with a fragile black sandal. "You might as well know the truth. Rupert was in business difficulties at the time of his death. His partner was suing him. Now the suit will be against Rupert's estate. There may not be much left for me when it is settled and the partner gets his share. In any case that settlement will take time and—I need money now. Desperately."

"For what?"

"What does anybody need money for? Clothes — rent — fun — everything."

Again something clouded and furtive in her eyes told me that she was lying. She needed the money for something more urgent than personal comforts.

Her voice shook. A reddish spark flared in her golden eyes. "You know I have more right to that money than you have and—no one will ever know what you did with it."

"What about this Mr. Bland—the man who will be waiting for Rupert's package in Chevy Chase this evening? What was Rupert's deal with him?"

"I don't know anything about a man in Chevy Chase."

I looked at Amanda thoughtfully.

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I had only her word for this and I no longer trusted her.

"Why was such a large sum to be paid in cash?"

"Rupert turned a lot of money into cash when his partner threatened to attach Rupert's checking accounts. If Rupert really owed money to this man in Chevy Chase, he can sue the estate for it. How can he prove the money started on its way before Rupert's death and disappeared on the way—unless you tell him? No one else knows anything about it."

"Except Tony Brooke." I told her how Tony had entered my cabin when the cash was spread out on the couch.

"I'll take care of Tony if he makes trouble."

"I'm not sure Tony is the only one," I said quietly. "At least one other person knows—the person who murdered Leslie and Albert Dawson."

"Murder?" Her eyes widened. "Oh, no! I don't believe it!" For the first time she showed signs of fear. "That's impossible. . . ."

"He was the purser on the *Santa Cristina* whom you knew as Mendoza," I went on. "She was his wife—a former maid of yours whom you knew as Livia Crespi."

"Crespi?" Amanda frowned. "A sly, sensual little thing. She was only with us a few weeks. I never liked her. She left without notice three days before you sailed."

"She sailed with us on the *Santa Cristina*. I believe she and her husband were killed because they were after Rupert's money."

Amanda looked at me with horror: "Do you mean that Tony . . . ?"

"Tony or someone else. You say you weren't driving a blue Buick with white-walled tires in New York. But someone was. Someone who followed me from your house to the B. and O. Terminal this morning. Possibly someone who was after the money. And who had already killed two people to get it."

"That frightened you, didn't it?" Amanda was watching me closely. "Well—I'm not easily frightened. Give me the money. Then you'll be safe. And I'll take my chances."

I shook my head.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Take it where Rupert told me to take it."

"Why on earth should you do that?"

I hesitated for an instant. Then I let her have it. "Because I—liked Rupert. And I don't like you."

The reddish glint burned in her eyes. "You mean you loved Rupert. I suspected something like that. Of course you know he despised you utterly. You have every trait that he disliked in a woman. You're all bone and sinew, shrewish and brainy in a cold, spinsterish way."

Amanda had opened her bag again. Her ungloved hand was groping inside it—for her cigarette case, I thought. Then she drew her hand out half way, holding it so the open frame of the bag screened it from anyone passing in the aisle. But I could see the brown, red-tipped fingers clenched tightly around a small,

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dark Colt revolver. The muzzle was pointed at my breast. It didn't waver.

"Amanda, have you lost your mind? You can't need money that badly!"

"I don't need it for myself." The hand gripping the gun was white at the knuckles. "I need it for Tony."

She whispered the words, yet they seemed to ring in my ears as if she had shouted them. "So you were the woman whose extravagance ruined Tony? And you left Rupert when he was dying and took a plane to New York so you could get that money for Tony from me! Rupert got Tony that job in the Quisqueyan bank when no one else would help him. And Tony used that job to rob the bank of money and Rupert of his wife."

"If you know so much you must know how badly Tony needs that money!" said Amanda fiercely. "It was Tony who told me that Rupert had cash on hand—that Rupert had probably given it to you to take to Washington for him after his accident. I came to New York myself because I was afraid Tony wouldn't be sharp enough to get the money from you on the ship, as we planned, and I was determined to get it for him before you reached Washington. I mean business, Nina. Hand it over!"

My thoughts raced. "I haven't got it with me. Do you think I'd travel with that package? After all that happened on the ship? I mailed it in New York. Addressed to myself at my Washington apartment. It should be there tonight."

"You're lying. Open your suitcase. I'm going to search it. I don't care what happens," she said quietly. "I love Tony. I couldn't bear it if he went to prison. If I can't have the money, I'll kill myself and take you with me."

You cannot argue with insanity. I stood up and lifted my suitcase down from the rack. My hands were tremulous as I groped at the hasps.

"Hello, there, Miss Keyes!"

At the sound of that deep, male voice, Amanda's whole body shivered and recoiled, as if every nerve were stretched taut ready to vibrate at the slightest sound. She thrust the revolver back into her bag and snapped the clasp shut. For the first time in our acquaintance, I was glad to see Jim Sherwood.

"What an odd coincidence—meeting you again so soon! I thought you were going to Washington by Pennsylvania last night?"

"I was, but I missed my train." I struggled to smile. "I didn't even know you were going to Washington."

"Nina, you haven't introduced us." Amanda's voice was cool and level.

"I beg your pardon. This is Mr. Sherwood—Mrs. Lord."

I had the satisfaction of seeing that I had really startled Sherwood. "Mrs. Rupert Lord?"

"Yes." Amanda's gloved hand tucked her bag under one arm. She was even smiling. "You knew my husband?"

"Slightly." Sherwood always stiffened at mention of Rupert. Now he skirted the subject. "Miss Keyes and

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I were fellow-passengers on the *Santa Cristina*. I was on my way to the club car just now. Won't you both come with me?"

I rose instantly. "We'd love to."

Amanda hesitated. "Are you going to leave your suitcase? There on the seat?"

"Why not?" I looked her full in the face, coolly. "There's nothing of value in it."

For the first time I think she believed my story about mailing the package to Washington.

"I left mine," added Sherwood with some amusement.

"Very well," Amanda rose.

We started down the aisle. I took pains to let Amanda precede me.

"I've often sailed on the *Santa Cristina*." She looked back over her shoulder to smile at Sherwood.

"Her last voyage was a little out of the ordinary," he returned.

"Then I missed something?"

"Indeed you did, Mrs. Lord." He reached an arm ahead of us to open the door. "Even Miss Keyes doesn't know the latest development. When Dr. Harley got his snake-box on the pier he found the snake inside was dead. He did an autopsy himself that same day—to find out why a bushmaster dies in captivity. To his amazement this particular bushmaster died of morphine poisoning."

In the club car we found a table for three. Sherwood ordered cocktails for Amanda and himself. I was content with beer. I needed a clear mind.

Just before we got to Baltimore I excused myself and walked toward the women's room in the next car. I got my suitcase from the seat where I had left it and walked back to the very last car in the train, which was the furthest from the club car. Then I was out and down on the platform—the last passenger to leave the train. I hurried through the crowd in the station. Outside I walked for several blocks until I came to a garage. It was a simple matter to rent a car that would take me to Washington as fast as the train.

For the first five minutes I kept looking out the rear window. I could see no sign of any other car following mine.

Of course I didn't drive to my apartment. Amanda would be there by this time, waiting for the package to arrive by mail. I drove to my office, a cubby-hole in one of those temporary buildings left over from the war.

That is where I am writing this letter.

Rupert's package is lying on my desk.

For the moment I feel reasonably safe.

But I can't stay here forever. In a few more minutes I shall take the package, go down to the street, mail this letter to you at the corner, and take a taxi to Chevy Chase. I don't believe anything will happen to me on this lap of my journey, but one thing worries me: will I be safe after I get rid of the money? Will Amanda and Tony and the person who followed my taxi in New York, believe me when I say that I no longer have it?

And another thing: am I doing something wrong in turning the

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money over to this unknown man, as Rupert asked me to do, instead of giving it to Amanda? Or the police?

I am too tired to think clearly now, Captain Urizar. I really need your advice and help. For so long I nerved myself to carry out Rupert's wishes no matter what happened that it may be sheer psychological momentum is carrying me on to the end of my mission rather than loyalty to Rupert's memory, as I'd like to think. . . .

Later: (8:05 P.M.)

I've just been to the window to smoke a cigarette and get a breath of fresh air. Not too fresh in Washington in June, but, at least, outdoor air without the office staleness.

As I looked out the street seemed empty at first. And suddenly I saw a man, standing across the street, under the shade of the trees.

If the street were not so empty, I would not notice him. If the light were not fading, he wouldn't be such a dim, unidentifiable figure. But I think I should mention him—just in case he is neither of these things . . .

May I ask you again to write me when you receive this letter, Captain Urizar? I am perplexed and I suppose I feel a little guilty because I didn't tell you I had recovered the money. I hope this letter will make some amends for that. I realize that you have no jurisdiction in the States, so I'm writing to you as a friend, rather than appealing to you as a police officer.

You see, now I've had time to think it over, I really don't want to give this package of Rupert's money to the man in Chevy Chase without at least one other person whom I can trust knowing something about it. You were the obvious choice for such a confidence. You know the story. You were on the *Santa Cristina*. But, unlike the other passengers, you have no personal interest in the case. Merely an official interest which lapsed when the two deaths were classified as accidents.

I shall hope to hear from you soon. And thank you once more for all your kindness to me at sea.

Yours very sincerely,

Nina Keyes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TO SHERWOOD THE TWILIT AIR SEEMED blue as it deepened by infinitely shaded degrees into the blackness of night.

Out of this darkness, into the spotlight of a street lamp, came a slender woman in a gray dress walking rapidly. Sherwood waited until she reached the corner, then moved after her at a sauntering pace.

Near the corner, he stopped under low branches where the shadows were deepest. One shadow seemed to detach itself from the others. Another man stood beside Sherwood, his face invisible in the darkness. "Your car's parked around the corner. I drove to your office when I reached Washington. They had a message for me—to meet you here."

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Sherwood answered in his soft drawl, hardly lounder than a whisper, but less sibilant. "She gave me the slip on the train. I tried her apartment, then came here to her office. The doorman said she was inside, so I telephoned my own office that message for you. There she is now."

The woman was at the curb, pushing a thick manila envelope into a letter box. Under one arm she carried a package wrapped in pink and gilt paper.

"I'll follow her," murmured Sherwood. "While you get hold of that envelope she just mailed. Then meet us at Chevy Chase."

Silently the other man moved away—a shadow melting into darkness.

The woman stood on the curb now, on hand lifted. The first taxi passed her, flag down. When this had happened twice, she glanced at her wrist watch. Just then, out of the darkness, lumbered the broad beam of a bus, its roof picked out in lights. Again her hand was raised. The bus swung to the curb and stopped. For a moment her figure was silhouetted against the light within the open doorway. The bus started with a lurch.

Sherwood walked swiftly along the curb until he came to a parked car—a blue Buick with white-walled tires. The bus was at the far end of the block, held up by a red light, when he let out the clutch and slid into the stream of traffic. The first bus was directly in front of him as they climbed the slope toward Chevy Chase Circle. Whenever it stopped, he slowed, his eyes on each passenger that alighted. Whenever it gathered speed, he pressed forward.

Together they crossed Rock Creek Bridge, leaving old Washington behind them for the new, raw district. At the Circle, the bus swung into the wide sweep of gravel and stopped. The last passenger to alight was the slender woman in the gray dress. She turned back toward Connecticut Avenue.

Sherwood waited until she had crossed the Circle, then followed her on foot for several blocks. She turned to the right and vanished. Sherwood hurried forward and discovered a graveled drive, so masked by trees and vines that he might not have noticed it if he hadn't seen her turn into it.

The drive curved twice before they came to an open space surrounded by woods on every side. A path paved with flagstones led through flower beds to a long, low house with peaked gables and casement windows.

The woman seemed to be pressing a doorbell. Almost instantly the door opened. Again he saw her trim figure silhouetted against a panel of light as she stepped inside. The door closed.

Sherwood crossed the lawn to one of the lighted windows. A French window, standing ajar afforded a perfect view into the room.

The woman was sitting in a winged chair covered with turquoise chintz. Its back was toward Sherwood. All he could see of her was a pair of neat ankles. Facing her were two men.

The first was youngish rather than young. There was immature exuber-

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ance in the extravagant cut of his blue suit, adolescent taste in the carefully matched colors of his tie, socks and shirt. But there was a fold of middle-aged fat under his chin. Sherwood had seen such young-old faces in photographs of the financial page of newspapers: *The Boy Wonder of the Business World, J. Coupon Inventory, just appointed third assistant vice-president of Piggly-Wiggly Candies, Inc., at the unprecedented age of thirty-eight.*

The other man was older and made no bones about it in his dress. If anything, he tried to emphasize his age. He has draped his elephantine shape in a seersucker suit, so loose and baggy that it suggested magisterial robes or a *toga wirilis*. The old man's face was broad with a boldly jutting nose and a wide, loose mouth—a Roman of the corrupt, Imperial days. It was a face Sherwood had seen before—in newsreels.

The young man was speaking to the woman. "You're fifteen minutes late."

"I wasn't sure anyone would come when I heard about Rupert Lord's death," added the old man. "That's why I'm here myself. I was getting worried."

"Quite unnecessary." The young man flashed a look of irritation toward the old man. "I could have handled the whole thing alone."

"Quiet, Sam." The old man turned back to the woman. "Can you tell us what's going to happen to Lord's company now he's dead?"

"I'm sorry, but I know nothing about that." It was the low-pitched, pleasant voice of Nina Keyes. "Rupert Lord simply told me to come to this address at this time and give this package to a Mr. Bland."

"I'm Bland," said the young man. But it was the old man who seized the package and started to open it.

Bland sat on the edge of a table, eyeing his elder cynically. "I don't see how you can keep the money if Lord is dead," he remarked.

"Why not?" The old man laid down the package, still unopened. "Damn it, I've earned this! You saw how I voted in today's papers. I'd like to see anybody take this money away from me now!"

Sherwood stepped through the window, into the lighted room. "That is just what you are going to see, Mr. Stiles."

A small cry of astonishment came from Nina. "You—here?"

The old man's cheeks took on a red-plum tinge. His eyeballs protruded, showing veined and yellowish whites. In that first moment of shock, he didn't utter a word.

Bland lost every appearance of flabbiness. Immediately he was taut and wary, collecting all his forces for a struggle.

"I've always wanted to meet Representative Jefferson Stiles," said Sherwood to the older man. "I've heard you so often on the radio denouncing graft in high places."

"Who are you?" demanded Bland.

"James Sherwood—a name that means nothing to you. But I can guess your function. You're a go-between or 'fixer.' You call yourself a lobbyist or, perhaps, a publicist. You

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live on retaining fees from half a dozen interests which you represent unofficially in Washington. And there are several hundred more unofficial representatives like you in this city than there are official representatives like Stiles."

Nina was leaning back gracefully in her winged chair. "You must have followed me here."

"I've been following you in my car ever since you left the *Santa Cristina*," answered Sherwood.

"Oh..." Comprehension dawned in Nina's eyes. "You were in the blue Buick!"

"Urizar and I followed you and Tony Brooke to the Lords' house in my car," explained Sherwood. "We watched it all last night, until you left for the B. and O. station this morning. While you were in the waiting room there, I was in the ticket office getting a reservation on your train to Washington. But I didn't approach you on the train until I saw Amanda Lord pull a gun on you."

Nina smiled. "I'd have felt much safer last night if I'd known you and Captain Urizar were outside. But why on earth did you two go to all that trouble? Just to protect me from Tony?"

"What the devil is all this about?" Jefferson Stiles had the politician's greatest asset—a voice that could shout down any other voice. He was shouting now.

Sherwood turned toward him. "A little matter of murder, Mr. Stiles, though I imagine the only charges against you will be bribery and conspiracy."

"You dare to insinuate..."

Bland could shout too. "Shut up, Jeff! Let's hear what he has to say. Then we'll know where we are."

"I saw you accept the money just now," went on Sherwood. "I heard you say you intended to keep it even though Rupert Lord was dead. And you mentioned your vote in Congress today which destroyed the Wanasook dam project that would have competed with Lord's private power company. It's a clear case of bribery. I can testify to that effect. So can Miss Keyes."

"And so can I," added Bland, swiftly and smoothly. "I had no idea that package contained money when I allowed it to be sent to my house. I thought it simply contained a few—er—blueprints and other documents."

"Why, you God-damned liar..." Stiles stumbled toward Bland.

"Now, Jeff, old man, don't get excited." Bland backed away. "You seem to have got yourself into a mess. If only you had consulted me!"

"I got myself into a mess?" roared Stiles. "I did consult you! And you told me cash would be perfectly safe and..."

Bland wasn't interested. "What is this 'little matter of murder,' Mr. Sherwood? Was Rupert Lord killed? Even if he was, I doubt if it's any of my business or yours. If you suspect anyone you should go to the police."

"That's just what I have done," responded Sherwood. "A police officer is coming to meet me here. He'll arrive at any moment."

Stiles turned toward the door. "All this is no concern of mine. I'm going

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home and call my doctor . . . And my lawyer . . ."

He was interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell.

Stiles hesitated, then sank back in a chair.

The door opened. Urizar stood on the threshold, holding a thick manila envelope. With quaint ceremony, Sherwood introduced him: "Captain Miguel Urizar of the Municipal Police in Puerta Vieja, Santa Teresa. Representative Jefferson Stiles. And Mr. Samuel Bland."

"Does a policeman from Santa Teresa have any jurisdiction in Washington?" demanded Bland.

"I have an extradition warrant," said Urizar.

"For . . . ?" Bland paused.

"For a murderer."

Bland looked relieved.

"I thought you were in New York, Captain Urizar," said Nina. "I just mailed a letter to you there in care of the *Santa Cristina's* pier."

"I came to Washington in Sherwood's car." Urizar turned to face Nina. "I've just read your letter. Sherwood and I saw you mail it. While he followed you here, my friends of the Washington police persuaded a post office inspector to get the letter out of the mailbox for me just before it was due for collection."

Nina looked from Urizar to Sherwood incredulously. "Why did you follow me? What has all this to do with you?"

Sherwood answered: "I'm an investigator for the Senate Committee on Lobbying Practice. I wanted to see who was going to get Lord's money." He smiled at her amazement. "Did you really think I was working for the Acme Construction Company? That was my 'cover job.'

The internal revenue people got onto Lord because his last tax return showed several large expenditures of cash for 'engineering expenses' that didn't correspond with anything his company had actually done in the past year. That was because he didn't want to pay income tax on money he was putting out for bribes. They got onto Stiles because listed as 'income' several large sums which he described as interest on small loans to friends—unusually high interest for personal loans."

"That was interest on personal loans!" cried Stiles. "My lawyer . . ."

"Quiet, Jeff," said Bland. "Let's listen to this. It's important."

Urizar handed his manila envelope to Sherwood. "This is Miss Keyes' letter." He turned to Nina again. "And interesting document. Except for one or two details, just about what I expected."

Nina rose. "May I go now? That letter tells you everything I know. And I'm so very tired."

"Not just yet, Miss Keyes," answered Urizar. "There are several points we have to clear up and you can help us—if you will be so kind."

Nina acknowledged this with a smile. She sat down again in the turquoise chair. "How can I help?"

"If Rupert Lord was killed, that's a matter for the Quisqueyan police," said Urizar. "And Stiles is Sherwood's job. I have only one interest

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in this affair—finding the murderer of Leslie and Albert Dawson, alias Livia Crespi and Henriquez Mendoza."

Nina was growing restless. "There's something I'd like to know first. Do you have any idea where the money was hidden on board ship at sea? I kept my eyes open. So did Tony Brooke. And probably Mr. Sherwood. Your men searched the ship thoroughly. Albert and Leslie Dawson must have searched as best they could surreptitiously. Yet none of us found the money. Where was it?"

"Leslie Dawson did find it," answered Urizar. "That is why she died. And Albert Dawson deduced its hiding place later. That is why he died. I didn't discover that one, inevitable hiding place until the end of the voyage.

"What was the one place where no one looked or thought of looking—except Leslie Dawson? The one place that most people would be afraid to approach? The one enclosure that was not to be opened throughout the voyage? But that actually was opened, at least twice?"

"Good God!" exclaimed Sherwood. "It's the old myth of a dragon or serpent set to guard a treasure! The monster defending the golden apples of the Hesperides!"

"Yes," Urizar sighed. "But consciously I was assuming that no thief would risk attack by a bushmaster in order to hide the money in Harley's snake-box. That was underestimating the compelling urgency of the money motive, though there were several other indications of the truth.

"For one thing: the puzzling factor in Leslie Dawson's murder was its method—snake bite. I couldn't believe any murderer would choose a snake for a weapon, when there was no way to make sure the snake would strike the intended victim. Yet I was sure the snake-box had been opened by human agency twice and the second time occasioned Leslie Dawson's death.

"At last I asked myself: could there be some other reason for opening the snake-box besides releasing the snake as a murder weapon? The answer leapt at me: hiding the money in the snake-box. Or recovering the money once it had been hidden there.

"When Harley told everyone at dinner that he would feed his specimens through mesh-covered openings in their box lids because those boxes must not be opened during the voyage, he gave a thief and potential murderer the idea of a perfect hiding place for stolen money. This thief suspected that Brooke and the Dawsons were after the money and believed that fear of the snake would keep them from taking it out of the snake-box even if they suspected it was hidden there.

"The bite of a vampire bat may cause paralytic rabies. That's why the snake was chosen instead of the bat as guardian of the treasure. Harley's first-aid kit, with its suction cups, tourniquets and anti-venin was stolen for self-protection.

"It was easy to unscrew the lid and slip the package inside without releasing the snake. The lid need be

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raised only three or four inches. It proved harder to replace the screws in haste and secrecy for the wooden lid was beginning to warp. Not realizing the safety value of screws, the murderer put nails through the screw-holes. The lid continued to warp, pulling the nails up with it and that is how the snake escaped the first time.

"Leslie Dawson was the second person to enter Harley's bathroom when the snake was restored to its box. The murderer was the first to enter. At that moment the money package must have lain openly on the straw at the bottom of the empty box, where it had fallen when it was slipped under the lid. The murderer had to seize that one chance, while the box was still empty, to push the package under the straw. Otherwise Harley would see the package when he put the snake in the box. And there wasn't time to hide the package elsewhere.

"As it turned out, there wasn't even time for that one, quick, furtive push since Leslie Dawson saw it and suspected that its purpose was to conceal the money she and her husband were plotting to steal. She didn't tell her husband. Presumably she decided to keep all the money for herself.

"For she returned alone to the Harleys' bathroom between two and five A.M., going through the empty cabin on the other side. It was easy to turn the screws the ship's carpenter had used, but she couldn't just raise the lid a few inches as the murderer had done while sliding the package inside. Leslie had to lift the lid high and reach down inside the box to get the package out. That took nerve for she had no anti-venin. But she was a West Indian, with a certain familiar contempt for snakes and, as Dawson said, the one thing she really feared was poverty.

"And that is how the snake escaped the second time. Perhaps it twined around her groping arm. Perhaps she shrank involuntarily from that clammy contact and the snake pursued her, as bushmasters have been known to do. Running from the snake, through the lurching ship, she fell over the balustrade, down the stairwell and the snake fell with her. By that time it had bitten her.

"No one heard her scream above the clamor of the storm. No one heard the thud of a heavy fall—with one exception, the murderer. It was the murderer who ran to the stairwell and saw Leslie Dawson below—still alive. The murderer had the only anti-venin and suction cups on board, stolen from Harley. They could have saved Leslie's life then, when she was first bitten. But the moment the murderer saw the snake, the murderer decided she must die.

"For the presence of the snake proved that Leslie had seen the stolen money pushed under the straw in the snake-box and returned to steal it herself. There was no other hiding place on the ship as secret as the snake-box, but now Leslie had discovered that secret, the money would not be safe there as long as she remained alive.

"Both her legs were broken by her fall. She couldn't escape the murderer

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by running or even crawling. She could scream—long and loud enough for someone else to hear her above the storm. Why didn't she? I can only conclude that the murderer knelt there, struggling with Leslie to hold one hand over her mouth, until her pulse, accelerated by terror and violence, pumped the envenomed blood through her veins to her heart and killed her."

"Why didn't the snake attack the murderer?" Bland sounded wary.

"Because the snake had momentarily exhausted its venom on Leslie Dawson."

"And the murderer took a chance that no one else would come along at that moment?" persisted Bland.

"Not a big risk in the early hours of the morning," answered Urizar. "The crew on watch was occupied with the storm. Had anyone else come along, the situation would have looked as if the murderer had just found Leslie and was trying to revive her. Any accusation of Leslie's, unsupported by other testimony, would be put down to shock or hysteria."

"But the money!" cried Nina. "Did Leslie have it with her when she fell? Or was it still in the snake-box?"

"We know it was in the snake-box later," explained Urizar. "Either the murderer put it back after Leslie died or Leslie was attacked before she got it out."

Sherwood chuckled. "And then Medusa showed signs of shedding her skin! Tough—for the murderer."

"So a heavy wrench was hurled at Harley, crippling his right hand," added Urizar. "He needed a steady right hand to control the snake with his rod. Without that and without his anti-venin kit, he didn't dare open the snake-box to help Medusa. The tip-off to the murderer was Harley's request for steel wool at breakfast. In one of his books, he describes his method of helping a snake in captivity to shed its skin.

"Only one person deduced that Harley was kept from opening the snake-box so he wouldn't discover something concealed there without his knowledge. And that this 'something' was the money exhaustive search had failed to discover elsewhere. That one person was Albert Dawson who showed sudden comprehension when he saw what had happened to Harley's hand. His actions must have betrayed his comprehension to the murderer, for soon afterward Dawson was tripped or pushed over the balustrade of the stairwell and killed. That was just after he had taken the money from the snake-box. As pharmacist's mate, he had hypodermics and morphine, so he was able to kill the snake with an injection of morphine through one of the mesh-covered openings, before he raised the lid."

"How did the murderer intend to recover the money?" asked Nina.

"From Dawson, I suppose," said Sherwood. "After killing him. But too many people came too fast when Dawson screamed—Mrs. Harley and Urizar."

"And I," added Nina. "I must have been in great danger when I picked up that package."

"Originally I believe the murderer

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intended to recover the money without Dawson's aid," put in Urizar. "But when the snake-box was sent to the hold, that project became difficult for a passenger, so the murderer allowed Dawson to steal the money before killing him."

"This so-called money package has been hi-jacked by one crook after another," Sherwood said with a touch of asperity. "How do you know the money's still inside?" He dragged the package across the table and tore the pink and gilt wrapping paper. Folded sheets of blank white paper fell onto the floor.

"The—the damned crooks! Where's my money?" roared Jefferson Stiles.

Bland looked at him in despair. "Jeff, you unteachable ass, shut up! Don't you see? You didn't expect money. You expected documents. You didn't even get documents. You just got blank paper. So they can't charge you with accepting a bribe."

"But my hundred thou—? Oh . . ."

"You mean your hundred blueprints of the Lord plant, don't you, Jeff?" said Bland.

"Oh . . . uh . . . sure." Deflated, Stiles, shambled back to his armchair. "Not a thing against me—legally, that is."

"We'll discuss that later," put in Sherwood. "The Treasury is still interested in the big interest on those small personal loans."

Nina was leaning forward, staring at the heap of blank white paper on the floor. "I don't understand this. It didn't occur to me to open the package when I found it where Dawson had dropped it. Where is the money? When was it stolen? And who stole it?"

"The murderer," answered Urizar.

"And you've been careful not to name the murderer," said Sherwood. "Isn't it about time you did? Or would you like me to do it?"

"Can you?" asked Urizar.

"Well, I remember distinctly the first person to enter the Harley's bathroom when we brought the snake back after its first escape—Nina Keyes."

"How utterly ridiculous!" Nina's dark eyes blazed at Sherwood.

"What about the suicide note found beside Dawson's body?" returned Sherwood. "Urizar told me it was in your writing!"

"Of course!" said Nina impatiently. "It was the second page of a letter Dawson dictated to me in Quisqueya. I suppose Dawson happened to be carrying it when he was struck down.

"But why did Dawson want you to write such a note in the first place?" demanded Sherwood loudly.

"To implicate me in his wife's death!" Nina was growing shrill. "I've already been over all that with Captain Urizar!"

"That suicide note was the most puzzling feature of the case." Urizar's quiet voice restored a surface calm. "There were only two possible explanations—either it was Dawson's plot against Nina Keyes or . . ." His voice dropped a tone. "It was Miss Keyes' plot against Dawson."

"What do you mean?" Nina's voice was as quiet as Urizar's now.

"Either Dawson dictated the suicide note to you, as you related in your

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script, or you, yourself, invented that incident while you were typing the script and then wrote the the suicide note that we found beside Dawson's body afterward to substantiate your story. In the second case, the suicide note was not found among Dawson's effects when we first searched the ship because it didn't exist—then. As it was supposed to be in your own writing, you could produce it at any time. No doubt you left it beside Dawson's body because you realized I would be troubled by our failure to find the suicide note earlier. Correlated with your script and your deductions, that suicide note threw more suspicion on Dawson than on you. Therefore it was just as likely to be your plot against Dawson as Dawson's plot against you. And once I became convinced Dawson had never dictated that note to you, its presence beside his body pointed to you as his murderer."

"I—don't understand," Nina's voice was a ghostly whisper, drained of breath and volume. "You think my script was all lies?"

"Not at all. In the beginning I warned Lindstrom that most of your script must be true—but that any part of it might be false. And that the false statements would be more revealing than the true statements, for they would show what points you were trying to conceal or distort."

"But how could you tell which parts were false?" interrupted Sherwood.

"A simple matter of reading between the lines," returned Urizar. "When the script dealt with incidents that occurred in the presence of other, living witnesses, it had to be true. But any incident that occurred when she was alone, or when she was with a witness since dead or discredited, might be false."

Urizar turned back to Nina. "According to your script, only one witness independent of Dawson and yourself knew anything about the illiterate gardener episode at the time it was supposed to have happened—Rupert Lord. Before you wrote the script you had learned from the ship's radio that he was dead, so he couldn't deny it. Dawson's own denial carried no weight for it was the unsupported denial of a man under grave suspicion.

"But..." Nina's voice was still a breathless whisper. "How could I invent the suicide note when I wrote the script? At that time, I had no way of knowing that the purser of the *Santa Cristina,* who called himself Mendoza, was really named Albert Dawson. That one of the women passengers who called herself Livia Crespi was his wife and that her real name was Leslie Dawson. I didn't know she'd been a maid at the Lords' or that Dawson had visited her there. Yet whoever planned that suicide note signed 'Leslie Dawson' must have known Leslie's real name and her relation to Dawson—things I didn't know until after her death."

Urizar answered patiently. "Have you forgotten how you helped Leslie Dawson look for her passport in her cabin before you wrote the script? The bearded photograph of Dawson might mislead a careless observer. You are alert. If you studied that joint

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passport and its two photographs for a few moments, it could have told you all you needed to know. That the photograph represented the purser whom you had seen out of uniform in the Lords' garden and in the post office at Quisqueya. That his real name was Albert Dawson. That he had a wife named Leslie and that she was this woman passenger known as Livia Crespi. We have only your own word for it that you didn't recognize her then as Amanda Lord's former maid. You claim that you saw only the outside of her passport—not the inside with names and photographs. That is another unsupported statement. The only other witness, Leslie Dawson, is dead."

"But I couldn't know she would be dead when I wrote the script!"

"You would know if you had already killed her."

"How could I possibly kill her that night when I needed every minute to type the script?

"We have only your word for that," said Urizar.

"And why did I go to so much trouble to incriminate myself?" Nina's manner was an admirable presentation of just anger, controlled and canalized as irony. "Leslie Dawson died of snake-bite. That might be accident or even murder, but never suicide. Why make up a silly story about a suicide note signed with her name?"

"Because it was you who left an overdose of sleeping medicine in her glass just before you began typing the script. Your suicide note story was tailored to fit her death from sleeping tablets. You even mentioned such a death as the usual form of suicide in your first interview with me, because the idea was still in the foreground of your mind. According to your script, you and she left Harley's cabin together that night. The script ends there, just after she mentions sleeping tablets. You must have stopped in her cabin for a few moments before going on to your own. You had just noticed her watching you when you pushed the money package under the straw in the snake-box. You were afraid she was after the money. Her sleeping tablets were there and a glass of water. She had told you she was going to take a dose that night. What could be simpler than adding a few extra tablets when she wasn't looking?

"You wanted her death to pass as suicide but—suppose it didn't? Then it must incriminate her husband, who was also after Rupert Lord's money. You couldn't get a suicide note in her writing. A typed suicide note is always suspect. You were no expert in forgery and a note clumsily forged in her writing would be detected. Then it came to you—your story about a fake, illiterate, dictating a suicide note to one woman, signed with another woman's name. That would enable you to use a suicide note in your own writing, signed with Leslie's name, in order to incriminate Dawson instead of yourself. You wrote the script in order to present that story in its most persuasive form, making it appear superficially that the illiterate gardener incident occurred before you could possibly have known Les-

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lie's real name or her relation to Dawson, and exploiting the reader's instinctive sympathy for a narrator in dangers and difficulties.

"Only—Leslie Dawson didn't drink her usual sleeping draught that night. She wanted to stay awake and get the money from the snake-box while everyone else was sleeping. You hadn't expected her to act so promptly or boldly. It was not the steward's scream that interrupted your typing at six A.M. It was Leslie's fall at about five-twenty A.M., which you alone heard because you alone of all the passengers had reason to be awake at that hour. That's the real reason your script broke off so abruptly in mid-sentence. You stopped typing in order to commit murder. You had no choice of weapons. You had to let the snake venom kill her. But her death from snake-bite made your script worse than useless—incriminating. When you returned to your cabin after killing her, the wretched script was still there, the last sheet in your typewriter. There wasn't time to destroy such a bulky document. It was you yourself who tossed it into the ventilator. Unfortunately for you, it was found and you were committed to a story you could no longer use or even explain."

"You have a luxuriant imagination, Captain Urizar." With an effort, Nina maintained her tone of irony. "You make it sound as if I planned to appropriate this money the first moment I saw it when Rupert's envelope caught on my suitcase."

"Was that the first moment you saw it?" he responded. "That's another assertion that rests on your word alone, since Rupert Lord is dead. It's far more likely he told you just what was in the package when he entrusted it to you—for whom it was destined and why. That was your chance. Stiles couldn't accuse you of theft without involving himself in charges of bribery. Like Brooke and everyone else in Quisqueya, you knew Lord wouldn't live to accuse you. You took great pains in the script to make us think you and Brooke expected Rupert Lord to survive his accident, though later Brooke himself told me that he and everyone else had expected Lord to die. I realized then that this was the one place in the script where you had risked falsifying the words of a surviving witness—Brooke. So the point must have been important to you and it was. For if the script had told the truth—that you could have seen an opportunity in Lord's death to steal his money while you were still in Quisqueya—everything you said and did in the first part of the script would have lost its atmosphere of innocence.

"Actually Lord himself was the only person who believed that he would live after that accident. His doctor wouldn't tell him he was dying. And Lord trusted you enough to tell you about his scheme to bribe Stiles. For he believed you loved him. He was too much an egoist to realize that your frustrated love had curdled into hatred and jealousy when he married Amanda. It never occurred to him that it was you who had loosened his saddle girth in a moment of un-

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controllable spite. I don't believe you ever quite forgot that it was Lord's parents who had dissipated your grandfather's estate.

"The story that Lord gave you the envelope without explaining its contents was a brilliant improvization, consonant with his character, concocted when Brooke found you with the money. Of course you tore Lord's envelope inadvertently. If you had intended to expose the money, you would have locked your cabin door. At that time your scheme was simple—to tell both Brooke and Stiles that the money had been stolen from you while actually keeping it yourself."

Nina had listened to this with growing disdain. Now she threw back her head. "This sort of fantastic speculation might convict an accused person in your Santa Teresa, Captain Urizar. But here, in the States, we require tangible evidence."

Before Urizar could answer, the telephone rang. He took the call, listened for a moment. He said only: "Thank you," and put the telephone aside.

"There is tangible evidence—now," he told Nina. While I kept you here, talking, the Washington police were searching your office. They have just found a manila envelope in one of your files. It's filled with money—a thousand bills of one hundred dollars each."

Jefferson Stiles sighed audibly.

Then—as if only the thought of that great chunk of money had sustained her so long—Nina Keyes broke down. It was not pretty. It ended the session.

But later that night Urizar and Sherwood met again in the Shoreham bar.

Sherwood said: "Thanks for not arresting her in New York. I could never have got the goods on Stiles if you hadn't given her enough rope to see if she'd keep her appointment with him. It was risky, I know. If she'd had sense enough to hand him the money, she might have gone scot-free. Her possession of the money was your only real evidence of theft and motive for murder. Hell, she could have bought back her life for a hundred thousand bucks!"

"I think that's what she meant to do—until the very end." Urizar was always melancholy after an arrest. "But when she finished that last page of her letter to me, she looked at that money in her office and—she couldn't bear to part with it. How curiously her respect for wealth permeated her script. She made Harley a grotesque crank. And you, a shabby adventurer. To her, a poor man was automatically an object of contempt or ridicule. Her need for money was less than Harley's or Dawson's. Yet she killed for it and they didn't. Possibly because she had once known wealth while they were conditioned to poverty."

"But why did she write the letter to you at all?"

"To explain her visit to Bland and Stiles and her attack on Tony. She must have suspected that I was following her. And she couldn't be sure whether Lord had notified Bland that she was the messenger bringing the money or not. So she couldn't by-pass

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Bland altogether."

"She was a fool to mention Leslie Dawson's passport at all in the script," said Sherwood practically.

Urizar frowned over this. "She couldn't omit that first visit to Leslie's cabin altogether. Someone might have seen her entering or leaving and the omission would seem suspicious after the murder. She could have omitted any reference to the passport, but then she would have had to invent something else to cover the few moments in Leslie's cabin and, throughout the script, she avoided fabrication, except for the suicide note story. It was convincing largely because it was presented in a setting of truth. If she had filled the script with other fabrications any one of them might have betrayed her through some unforeseen discrepancy with the known truth. So she used omission as her method of distortion—the technic of her profession, advertisement copywriting.

"For example: she naturally omitted all mention of hiding the money in the snake-box and putting the sleeping medicine in the glass. But there was no fabrication at these points in her narrative. She stuck to truth so closely that she showed us she had opportunities to do both these things. She told us she went below to her cabin to get the traveler's checks for the Seaman's Home collection while all the other passengers were in the lounge. That put her in the right place at the right time to hide the money in the snake-box. She told us that she left Harley's cabin with Leslie Dawson after Harley recaptured the snake that first time, and even that Leslie mentioned her sleeping tablets. That put Nina in the right place, at the right time, to go on to Leslie's cabin and increase the dose of sleeping medicine. And each of these incidents is preceded or followed by a time gap in the narrative suggesting that something has been left out. Why, Nina's letter to me even includes her murderous attack on Brooke in New York, but, by omitting her own motives and emotions, she makes it read like self-defense."

"What do you mean by the 'technic of advertisement copywriting'?" demanded Sherwood.

"The contrived omission," explained Urizar. "Advertisements always omit inconvenient facts and tell the residue of truth instead of fabricating false statements. They say their cigarettes are made of the best tobacco—which is true. But they don't say other cigarettes at the same price are made of the same tobacco—which is also true. So the reader concludes that their cigarettes are made of better tobacco than others at the same price—which is false."

Urizar took out a handful of coins to pay for the drinks. "There's a quotation that applies to Rupert Lord's money and all it did to these people." He turned the silver over in his palm. "'When I hand you a coin, I hand you both good and evil.'"

"Where's the good?" demanded Sherwood, wryly.

"In you. You didn't fall for the money. And you did put a stop to Stiles."

THE END

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Noted mystery and science fiction writer Robert Bloch has a particular talent for the offbeat, the wry unexpected. Here he offers a deadly duo—modern fables about two very different kinds of desire...and their unpleasant consequences.

THE DEADLIEST ART

by ROBERT BLOCH

I: the Ungallant Hunter

IT WAS A HOT NIGHT, EVEN FOR the tropics. Vickery was just mixing a gin-and-splash when he heard the discreet tap at the hotel-room door.

"Sarah?" he murmured.

A man entered quickly and quietly, bolting the door behind him.

"I'm Fenner," he said. "Sarah's husband." He grinned down at Vickery in the chair. "Surprised to see me? Sarah was."

"Really, now." Vickery started to rise.

"Don't bother," Fenner told him. "Just stay where you are." Still grinning, he pulled the big Webley out of his jacket and pointed it at Vickery's stomach.

"Sitting target," Vickery said. "Not very sporting, old boy."

"You're a fine one to talk about sportsmanship, after what you did with my wife. Great White Hunter, eh? Adjoining hotel-rooms and all—must have been quite a safari."

Vickery sighed. "I suppose there's no sense my denying it. So shoot and be hanged."

"Just the point. I don't mean to be hanged. So I won't shoot." Still holding the gun, Fenner fumbled in his jacket-pocket and produced a small leather pouch. He opened it gingerly, then dropped a squirming, brilliantly-colored object at Vickery's feet. It looked like a tiny coral bracelet, but it was alive.

"Better not move," Fenner muttered. "Yes, it's a *krait*. Deadliest little snake in the world, they say."

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"Fenner, wait, listen to me—"

The tiny coral bracelet suddenly uncoiled. Before Vickery could draw back, pink lightning struck. Again and again the *krait* sunk its fangs into Vickery's right leg, through the thin trouser-cloth.

Vickery gasped and closed his eyes, making no move to crush the serpent. Suddenly it subsided sluggishly and coiled up again in the center of the carpet.

Fenner gulped, wiped his forehead, and rose. He put the gun over on the table. "I'll leave this," he said. "Maybe you'll want to use it. They tell me that in less than ten minutes—"

Vickery chuckled. "Fenner, you *are* a mug!"

"What d'ye mean?"

"A bazaar-native sells you a harmless grass-snake and you take his word that it's a *krait*. Just as you took the word of a jealous woman that we were having an affair. Actually, old boy, she was miffed because I wanted no part of her." Vickery chuckled again. "Not a gallant statement, I admit, but you're entitled to know the truth."

"You don't expect me to swallow that, do you?"

"Suit yourself." Vickery waved a hand. "Oh, don't go. Sit down and have a peg with me. Nothing's going to happen—you'll soon see."

And nothing *did* happen, except that Fenner had his drink, and a short talk which fully convinced him that Vickery was as innocent and harmless as the tiny snake that was curled up on the carpet.

When he left, he apologized profusely to Vickery for everything. He'd sent Sarah packing on the first plane to London, and planned to follow her himself in the morning.

Vickery wished him godspeed. "Take your gun," he said. "And the snake, too. You needn't bother with the pouch—just put it in your pocket. Snakes love warmth and body-contact."

After Fenner left for the adjoining room formerly occupied by his wife, Vickery continued his preparations for retiring. His mind busied itself with mathematical calculations. How long would it be, for example, until Sarah arrived in London and he could put through a call? How much had she said the old boy was worth? And just how long would it take for that *krait* to stir in annoyance in Fenner's pocket and strike through the cloth into his fat flesh?

The answer to the last question was provided quickly.

Vickery heard the man screaming through the thin wall of the adjoining room, at the precise moment that he sat down on the bed and unbuckled the straps of his artificial leg.

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II: A Fast Fix

GORDY WAS GIGGING DATES AROUND Chi and it was a real drag, until he latched onto Uncle Louie.

Just in time, too, because they'd started the countdown on the rocket to Flipville. He got the word from Phil, one of the cats in the combo he was working with.

"You've got a big habit," Phil said. "Go see the man. Uncle Louie—a boy's best friend."

Gordy went to see him right away, because he did have the biggest kind of a habit, and with a capital "H".

Uncle Louie turned out to be an old cat who ran a pawnshop for a front, down on South State. He had the stuff, and it was mellow, and he gave Gordy the fastest kind of a fix.

So everything was copasetic, except in the wallet department. The gigs weren't bringing in enough to pay for his kicks.

When he asked for credit, Uncle Louie made like a federal case. Gordy pawned his watch, his studs, his fancy threads. But the habit was bigger than both of them, and pretty soon Gordy was one sick Daddy-O. He began missing on the rim-shots and his paradiddles were off.

"You want a fix?" Uncle Louie said. "So pawn the drums."

"Hock my traps? Man, I can't play without 'em, like."

"You're shaking so you can't play anyway," Uncle Louie told him, and it was true. "Look, I give you a week's supply. A whole week."

It sounded like a gasser to Gordy. A week on the stuff would straighten him out so he could fly again. "All right," he said. "I'll go for broke."

But the week went by, and then another two days, and Gordy was climbing the walls. The shakes hadn't come yet, but the voices were here in hi-fi.

At first when Phil showed up at his pad and told him about the lake cruise bit, he didn't believe it was for real. But Phil laid it to him solid. "We book for the whole summer, starting tomorrow night. So pull yourself together and we'll ball."

Gordy fell up to Uncle Louie's place that night, figuring to explain the job set-up so the old cat would give him a break—let him have his traps and maybe a little goose-juice on the cuff.

Only Uncle Louie wasn't having any. "No dough, no drums," he kept saying. "I ain't in business for my health."

He was a fine one to talk about health, with Gordy digging his wig for a fix. Gordy grabbed him by the collar, talking up a storm. He came on strong about how he had to have it, and his traps too.

Uncle Louie tried to brush him

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off. So Gordy went behind the counter and dug out his traps for himself. Then there was a hassle, and that's when the traps fell and Uncle Louie kicked the heads in.

He did it, the old cat busted the traps right in front of Gordy's eyes and busted Gordy's job. Until Gordy found himself busting Uncle Louie, with the big hatchet he'd grabbed from under the counter—busting him again and again, and screaming in that high, bugged voice.

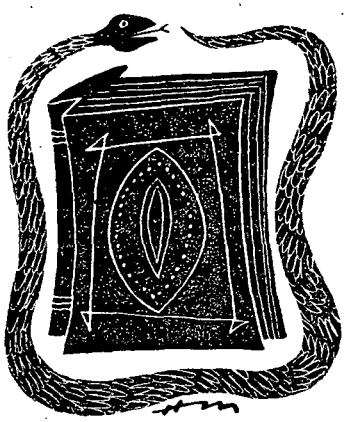
So Gordy got his fix after all. But Uncle Louie must have gone to the bank earlier, because there was no dough around the place tonight. Nothing but pawnshop junk. No dough, no traps. And tomorrow Gordy would need his drums. But the heads were busted in—just like Uncle Louie's head. The old cat was dead allright.

He looked at the drumheads and at Uncle Louie, and at the hatchet in his hand. Then he noticed there was a whole case full of medical instruments under the counter . . .

The next night he lugged his drums up the gangplank of the excursion boat. He was nine times higher than the Wrigley tower, but he was ready to play and he *did* play. The traps had never sounded better.

"So you got 'em back," Phil said. "How'd you operate, man? Uncle Louie is a pretty tough customer."

Gordy did a fast paradiddle on his brand new drumheads. Then he grinned. "You know the old saying," he said. "There's more than one way to skin a cat."



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Some women like to play the lion, but when the lamb is smart and ambitious to be on the police force, anything can happen . . .

THE END OF THE LINE

by MIRIAM ALLEN DE FORD

THE EXPRESS BUS DID NOT STOP FOR the passengers between the downtown district and the other side of the park. During rush hours there was a long double line always waiting, at the downtown terminal — stretching all the way down the block and sometimes around the corner.

Tim Healy, the young driver, packed them in as usual this evening, imploring people who could scarcely breathe, let alone move, to pass to the rear of the bus. Even the front platform, where they got in, was crowded so that he could see nothing in his mirror but clustering heads. It didn't matter, as they would not be starting to get out for a long time yet.

The bus pursued its usual course; gradually, after they crossed the park, it began to empty. But when they reached the out-run terminal, a block from where he started packing them in again, there were still some 30 or 40 passengers left. One by one they left, by either the front door or the middle one, and Tim glanced casually in his mirror before locking the door and driving around the block for the in-run.

They hadn't all gone. One man still sat, apparently asleep, in the last right-hand seat to the rear, by the aisle. Sighing, Tim got up and went back to him.

"Come on, buddy," he said. "End of the line."

The man paid no attention. He was youngish, but growing fat, a white collar worker by the looks of his clothes. Another drunk. Tim sighed again, and wondered how soon he would hear about his appointment to the police force. He shook the man's shoulder, not too gently.

The man promptly slid off the seat on to the floor. A handkerchief which had been stuffed be-

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tween his neck and his collar fell out. It was stiff and dark with blood.

Tim Healy thought fast. Then he went back to the driver's seat, put up a sign reading: "Take Next Bus," locked his door, and sped to the car-barn.

Bill Schmidt was on duty.

"What the devil are you doing here, Healy?"

Tim opened the door and got out.

"Call the police," he said briefly. "I've got a dead man in here. Somebody murdered him."

Detective Sergeant Oscar Brant of the Homicide Bureau interviewed Tim. Then he said: "O.K., Healy. That's all we need from you now. Give me your address and we'll get in touch with you later. You'll have to testify at the inquest, of course."

Tim stood up. He hesitated, and his good-looking young Irish face turned red.

"Look," he got out at last, "could—couldn't I kind of help around with this? I feel responsible."

"Why should you?" Brant's grey eyes sharpened. "You're in the clear. You're the one person in the bus that couldn't have done it. And you've told me the truth, haven't you—that you never saw him before and don't know who he is?"

"Sure," said Tim stubbornly. "But it was my bus, and I'm responsible. And there's another thing. I'm—I hope that any day now I'll be on the force myself. I took the examination two months ago, as soon as I was discharged from the service, and I'm high on the eligible list. I'd be mighty grateful for a chance to see how you do it."

"Hmph," Brant grunted. "You'll be directing traffic a long time before you get near the Homicide Bureau, my lad."

Brant cleared his throat and said: "I can't have you interfering or butting in, you know. But I'll tell you what's doing. Got any ideas?"

Tim Healy flushed again.

"I was thinking—the person who did that was left-handed."

"Hmph! Got that, did you? Why? I know, but I want to see if you do.

"Well, he was sitting by the aisle, in the right-hand rear seat. Only the person sitting by the window could have stabbed him in the back of the neck—nobody could stand behind him, and anybody standing by his right side would have had to stoop and somebody would have noticed."

"That's right. But we can't bring in every left-handed man in the city, can we?"

"Of course not. Or woman, either."

"Woman?"

"Couldn't a woman have done it?"

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"Sure, as far as strength goes. But what makes you think it might have been a woman?"

"Well, when a man and woman get on a bus, she goes first. She picks out the seat. And she sits next to the window."

"Any reason why it shouldn't have been some man who happened to be sitting there?"

"Not that. Only a lunatic would stab some guy he didn't know, who just happened to be next to him. And he wouldn't do it that way—in the back of the neck, and stuffing a handkerchief in to stop the blood, and all that."

"You'll do. Come down to the Hall of Justice when you get off duty. I'll be there till late. My first job is to find out who he was. He wasn't robbed. But there wasn't a thing on him to say who he was. I've got to comb the neighborhood to see if he belonged there. If not—unless we get a lucky break—we're going to have to rely on finger-prints."

But when Tim Healy arrived at the Hall of Justice, the lucky break had happened.

"Name's Samuel Carpenter," said Brant. "Lives the other end of town—don't know what he was doing way out there. Wife phoned an hour ago, when she got back from work—she's a doctor's nurse. Seems he was to have met her outside the office building, and he wasn't there. She waited, and he didn't come. Finally she went home, and he wasn't there either. Never missed an appointment in his life, she says. She called a paper to find out if there'd been a traffic accident. There hadn't, so she called the police. Kind of quick, I should say, but he was the kind you set your watch by, and in the seven years they'd been married he'd never done anything like this. Didn't drink."

"What was his business?"

"Insurance agent. She came down and identified him. I sent her home again in a police car."

"But look, she could have done it. She could have met him and they could have waited in line until they were at the head of it and could pick out that seat in the bus. Then she could have gone home and done her phoning. I guess you've thought of all that already."

"We've thought of it," said Brant grimly. "She's being watched. But she's got a perfect alibi. Your trip started at five-fifteen. She was in her office till after six. Her boss—Dr. Messenger in the Physician's Building—confirmed her statement. So did the last patient of the day—a guy named Rogers who was having shots for something. She and the doctor both stayed overtime because of him—he couldn't get there till after work."

"Oh."

"Oh it is. Now we've got to go over Carpenter's past with a fine

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tooth comb. Trace his action all day, find out if he had any prospect out in that district he was going to call on, go into his past, all the way back. And Mrs. Carpenter's too, of course."

"How did she take it?"

"All right. I mean, she was shocked and upset, about the way anybody would be."

"What caused his death?" asked Healy.

"What do you think? Stab wound upward into the brain from beneath, to leave out the doctors' jargon. Death was instantaneous."

"Could an ordinary knife do that?"

"What's on your mind? Oh—a surgical knife, eh?"

"Something like that."

"I see what you're driving at. Well, the wife is always the first suspect, of course, and alibis can be broken. This one is pretty good, though—Messenger's a well-known doctor, and Rogers, though he isn't over-bright, is a perfectly solid citizen—receiving clerk at Nathanson's shoe store."

"Would it be all right," said Tim hesitantly, "if I went to see Dr. Messenger, professionally? Tomorrow's my day off. I've got a little wen on my neck that's needed taking off for a long time."

"Now, see here, you've made some pretty good guesses so far, but this is no place for an amateur."

"Sure. I just want to look around.

"O.K. But keep your mouth shut, and don't tell anyone you're from the police, because you aren't. Inquest, by the way, is on Thursday. You'll get a notice.

"And good luck, boy." For the first time, Brant put out his hand. "My kid was going to come on the force if he'd come back from Korea." He turned away abruptly.

Tim Healy opened the door of Suite 1407. There was a rather small waiting-room, with several people waiting. In a minute the inner door opened, and a nurse in uniform came out. Whether it was Mrs. Carpenter or not he did not know.

If it was, his name might mean something. He explained about the wen. His name was Joseph Sullivan. He was a truck-driver. He had been, before 1941.

"Who recommended you?" the nurse asked.

"I called the County Medical Society."

"Oh, yes." Every doctor knew about the County Medical's phone service. "Well, the doctor's very busy, and there's no hurry about a thing like that, you know."

"The only trouble is," Tim smiled his beguiling Irish smile, "this is my day off. It's the only day I can come."

"Next Tuesday, then?"

"Next Tuesday's my mother's birthday. Look, sister—I asked her

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and she said, 'Get that thing burned off your neck—I'll wait till everybody else has been taken care of."

"I don't know," said the nurse doubtfully. "The doctor wanted to get away early. I'll ask him."

Tim was sizing her up. She must be Mrs. Carpenter; otherwise she wouldn't know the doctor's plans—that is, unless there was another nurse. He should have asked Brant that. You'd think a widow would want time off till her husband's funeral at least.

She was a bit on the stocky side, but rather pretty at that, with big brown eyes and long lashes. Tim tried to figure out if those eyes had done any crying recently. It was hard to tell. She swished away into the inner office, and he sat down to wait.

Presently she came back. She called in a man who was sitting by the window, and then she turned to Healy.

"All right," she said. "Dr. Messenger says he'll do it, but you'll have to wait quite a while. You can go away and come back later, if you want."

"I'll wait," said Tim. He could think there as well as anywhere.

It was half-past five when the last patient was gone. The nurse opened the door and beckoned.

"Go in the room at the end of the hall," she instructed him. "And take off your coat and shirt. The doctor will be with you in a few minutes."

Dr. Messenger was tall and slender, with a little mustache. He seemed to be pushing forty. He came in abruptly, with the nurse following.

"Mr. Sullivan? Let's see that neck."

He inspected Tim through gleaming spectacles.

"That's hardly enough to bother with," he said genially. "We'll open the cyst with a local anaesthetic. Fix you up pretty for the girl friend, eh?"

Tim smiled politely.

"Put on the antiseptic, Mrs. Carpenter," said the doctor. "And give him the anaesthetic. I'll be back by the time it's taken hold—I have to phone my dinner date that I'll be late."

"Gee, I'm sorry," said Tim. So it *was* Mrs. Carpenter.

"That's all right, young man—that's a surgeon's life for you." The doctor vanished. Mrs. Carpenter swabbed his neck with something that stung and then felt cool. Then she filled a syringe. "This will be just a pin-prick," she said. It wasn't; it hurt. Tim wriggled. On the white table, next to the running water, was a set of long, fine surgical knives.

Suddenly he wonder if he'd been so smart after all. Suppose they knew who he was? Oh, rats, how could they?

His whole neck began to feel

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numb. The nurse took his pulse. He glanced at her hand. There was no wedding-ring on it.

Why should there be? People don't wear wedding-rings on their right hands. Then he realized. She was taking his pulse with her left hand.

It all clicked. But it wasn't evidence; Tim knew that.

The doctor came back. He picked up one of the knives, laid the point gently against Tim's neck. "Feel that?" he asked. Tim shook his head.

He couldn't feel anything and he couldn't see the doctor, who stood behind him. He watched Mrs. Carpenter. She the doctor.

Unless he could trap them into something, this was all wasted time – except for getting rid of that wen. He thought fleetingly of his promise to Brant. He decided to take a chance.

"I guess I told you a lie," he remarked conversationally. "I didn't just come here because the County Medical recommended you. Fellow I deliver stuff to at Nathanson's–guy named Rogers–told me to go to you with this thing, a long time ago. "I forgot about him till just now."

A second later he could have bitten his tongue out. What a moment to pull that, when Dr. Messenger's knife was working right on the back of his neck! He felt a sudden thrill of fear. But nothing happened.

"Hank Rogers?" said the doctor calmly. "Yes, he's an old patient of mine. Son of our old family cook, as a matter of fact; I've known him since we were both kids."

"Is that so?" Tim was watching Mrs. Carpenter. Her eyes were trying to signal something to the doctor.

"There," said Dr. Messenger. "We've got the contents evacuated and the cyst wall cut away. Now we'll dress it and you come in two or three times more for dressings and that will be that. The scar will hardly show after a while."

"Thanks, doc." The doctor stood aside and the nurse came forward with a pad of gauze with something spread on it. She fixed it to his neck with plaster. The anaesthetic was wearing off, and the place burned, not badly.

"That may hurt a bit tonight and keep you awake," Dr. Messenger added. "Give him two or three tablets to take if it pains him, Mrs. Carpenter."

The nurse went to the medicine cabinet on the wall, opened a bottle, and shook out some tablets, which she put in a little envelope and held out to him. He reached his hand for it.

"No," said Dr. Messenger evenly. "Not that." He took the envelope and laid it down.

"You fool!" cried Mrs. Carpenter in a low, bitter voice.

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"Shut up, Margerie!" he said.

I will *not*. Who does he think he is, coming spying on me like that? Did you think I wouldn't recognize you, Mr. Sullivan or whatever your name is, just because you weren't in uniform? Well, you can't prove anything on me—just try it!"

"Margerie!"

The nurse's eyes widened, and she clapped her hand to her mouth.

The door opened. Tim had never been so glad to see anyone in his life as he was to see Oscar Brant and his fellow-officer.

"Did you think I was going to let you go there alone, boy?" Brant said some hours later, at the Hall of Justice. "We were right behind you as soon as you went into the office. You were the goat tethered out for the lion. If the goat's lucky, the lion gets shot before the goat is eaten. We heard all of it through the door."

"I never thought she'd pull a boner like that," Tim said. "The doc tried to stop her, but she couldn't. I'll never forget her face when she realized what she'd said, and that she couldn't possibly have recognized me if she hadn't been on that bus."

"She lost her nerve when Dr. Messenger saw her take the pills from the wrong bottle. You'd have had a good long sleep if you'd taken one of those, boy."

Tim shuddered.

"Why did he stop her?" he asked curiously. "They were in it together, weren't they?"

"Yes and no. He stopped her because he's a doctor—because doctors don't poison their patients and don't let them be poisoned. And he had nothing to do with Carpenter's murder—just protected her after it was done. I've got full confessions from both of them. Rogers was easy to persuade, on some trumped-up story; Messenger's been giving his mother a pension ever since she got too old to work—they both worship the doctor and would do anything he asked them."

"The doctor and the nurse were in love, weren't they? I noticed the way she looked at him when she didn't think I could see her."

"Yes, they were in love and they wanted to get married. Carpenter wouldn't give her a divorce and she had no grounds against him. She got desperate and cooked up this scheme. The way you thought, she swiped a surgical knife and returned it this morning. As a nurse, she knew where to stab with it. She got off early yesterday—to do some shopping, she told the doctor—and kept a date she'd made with her husband."

"Why did she pick my bus, and what excuse did she give for wanting to go to that part of town?"

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"She didn't pick your bus especially – just your line, because it's the only express, and stays crowded right up to near the end of the route. She kept them both waiting till they could get on a bus first and get the seat she wanted. Carpenter was kind of heavy and only too willing not to have to stand.

"As for the excuse she gave him, they were supposed to go and talk over their marital troubles with her sister, who lives out near the beach. We found out last night she had a sister there. That was probably how she knew about the express bus in the first place."

"What was that stuff he pulled about going out to phone, to postphone his dinner date? I couldn't figure that out—if it meant anything, that is."

"That was code between them, for your benefit. It meant, 'We'll have dinner together when I'm through with this guy.' He just went back to his office and fiddled around with some notes for a few minutes. We could see him – we slipped into the linen closet when we heard him say he was leaving, and left the door ajar."

"Will they do anything to him?"

"Accessory after the fact, I'm afraid. Poor devil, he's ruined. That's what comes of getting mixed up with a woman like that. She was smart, all right, but smart in the wrong way and not quite smart enough. It was an almost perfect murder."

"Till you got a goat," grinned Tim Healy.

"Till we got a goat. This is going to count for you, my boy—I'll see that it does. It won't be long now till you get your appointment. And some day you'll be working with the Homicide Bureau, I'll guarantee that. Tell me, did you recognize her when you saw her—did you remember seeing her on the bus?"

"No, how could I? I see a thousand of them or so every day. I don't notice them unless they have two heads or something striking like that. But she recognized me, because there was only one of me."

"And forgot to keep her mouth shut when she got excited. We could get her for attempted murder, giving you those tablets, if we didn't have her dead to rights on the other charge.

"Tell me one more thing, and then I'm off duty for the day and we can have a bite to eat together. What made you suspect it was Mrs. Carpenter in the first place? I mean, aside from the fact that the murdered man had a wife and that a wife is always suspect?"

Tim grinned shamefacedly.

"I didn't suspect Mrs. Carpenter particularly, but I was darned sure it was a woman, and you didn't find there was any other woman in his life. It was the

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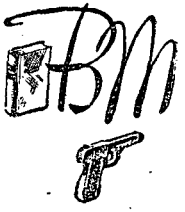
handkerchief – the one that was stuffed under his collar."

"The handkerchief? But it was a man's—I checked on that."

"Sure – but it had been in a woman's handbag. It was soaked with blood, but there was a little smudge in one corner that wasn't blood.

"It was lipstick."



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MYSTERY PUZZLE:

THE LOADED RIFLE

CAPTAIN HIRAM BOTZ, MILITARY Police, lifted the sheet which covered the dead body of Walt Kelly, ex-private, U. S. Army. The bullet had passed through the neck and left the nasty kind of hole a 30 caliber, M-1 rifle inflicts. But this wasn't war, the captain mused, it was murder. He walked to his office and asked the sergeant-major to send in Private Finch.

"Okay, Finch, let's have it."

"It was about 9 o'clock sir, fully dark out. As you know we were on tactical bivouac and each squad in our company had posted a guard about a half hour before. It was the last night of basic training. Well, when it began to get dark I stopped patrolling and settled under a tree to listen."

"Were you assigned this position?" asked the captain.

"No sir, I picked it myself. You know as well as I do that you can hear a lot farther than you can see at night. Like I said, it was about 9 when I heard this rustling noise from the bushes. The brush was thick and pretty dry all around that area, so I could hear it clearly. I froze until I was sure that there was someone out there. I yelled out the password challenge, 'fair', and waited for the response, which was 'lady'."

Botz interrupted. "How far away was this fellow when you heard the rustling?"

"A good thirty or forty yards, captain."

"Go on."

"When I didn't get a response I figured I'd shake this guy up a little. I had eight rounds of blank ammo in my clip. We'd been using blanks during the day's field problems. I pointed my rifle at the guy and squeezed off a shot. Only when I felt the rifle kick and saw the slug whip through the brush I knew it was no blank. The next thing I knew another shot rang out behind me and the guy out in the bushes, Walt, I mean, screamed and thrashed to the ground. I was stunned at first, and when I got to Walt I found him dead, a bullet hole through his throat. Whoever had fired the second shot, the one which killed Walt, had ducked out when I ran toward Walt."

"It's rather strange that another sentry didn't know the password, isn't it?" asked Captain Botz.

"Damned strange, sir."

"How far was the man who fired the second shot from where you were?"

"Not more than fifty feet, captain."

"Were you Kelly's best friend, Finch?"

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"Well sir, Kelly didn't have any friends to speak of. You see, most of the men in the platoon owed him money, including me. He had a nasty habit of being a big winner in poker games and charging interest on the I.O.U.'s. I was as friendly with him as anyone."

"Who knew that both you and Kelly were on guard?"

"Anyone could have known I was on duty, but only Kelly's squad leader and I knew that he was, since Jones, that's the squad leader, picked him while I was speaking to Kelly, not ten minutes before we both took our posts."

"The same Jones who sent Kelly on guard without telling him the password?" asked Botz.

"That's right sir, it *was* his job!" Finch said excitedly.

"Did Jones owe Kelly any money?"

"Yes sir, about $500. Do you think he could have . . ."

"Planted the bullet in your rifle that missed Kelly?" Captain Botz finished. "And then, having hidden in the brush in case you happened to miss, finished off the job when you actually did miss?"

"That's it sir! Jones was the only one who knew both Kelly and I were on guard. He must have planted that bullet in my rifle, knowing in advance that I would fire on Kelly when he didn't give the response. When he purposely neglected to tell him the password he'd know that I would fire on Kelly. Except that I missed and he had to fire himself."

"That'll be all," said the captain, "you've been a great help."

Captain Botz spent the next hour checking Finch's story. Everything seemed to fit, almost too nicely. There had been two shots all right, and no one except Jones admitted knowing that Kelly was on guard. When questioned about the password Jones frankly admitted his neglect in forgetting to inform Kelly.

Botz called Private Finch back. "Finch, I was almost taken in by your fine acting job. But there was one slip-up in your story which told me that you had killed Kelly yourself and were trying to drop the noose around Jones' neck by concocting this story.

What was the slip-up?

—Vito Zambiglioni

The captain was well aware that a listening sentry can hear a twig snap a half mile away at night. Finch had even stated that he heard Kelly rustling in the thick, dry brush at a distance of forty yards. Yet he maintained that Jones had reached a spot half as close, through the same brush, in order to fire the shot. Not only would it have been impossible for Jones to creep in that close, but he could not have hidden there earlier since Finch also said that his listening post was selected at random by himself.

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The boss's wife liked fun and games too much, and I was playing it smart—I figured I could hold my job forever if I helped the boss take care of her . . .

"I'LL TAKE CARE OF YOU"

by George Johnson

WHEN JOHN FORBES GOT BACK down to the lot after the wedding reception Wednesday afternoon, I asked him how it was. The used car business was bad and I knew he was worried about what it would cost him.

"Expensive," he said. He opened the evening paper to the used car ads but he didn't read them. He sat there with his feet on the old desk in the shack at the back of the lot. His eyes had a cloudy look.

I tried to think of something to say to change the subject. I didn't want him to start thinking he didn't need me, because jobs are hard to find for an old man, and I and the wife needed the money. I keep the cars wiped off and the trash picked up, and watch the lot when John's gone.

He said, "In the lobby, I told the manager to send me the bill. But she horned in and said why couldn't I pay it now, we're not paupers. Her and her mouth."

He meant his wife Dorothy. She's the one that insisted on a big church wedding and a country club reception.

"So there's a thousand bucks I'll never turn over again. I coulda turned it twice before they sent me the bill." He rattled the paper like he could strangle it. "I hope they get transferred out of town quick."

He meant his daughter Lily and her new husband. He meant Dorothy would be running their lives, too, if they stayed. He'd get them to leave if he could, because Lily was all he had left and he wanted her to be happy. He had a boy killed in the war, which is why he calls himself Ray's Auto Sales. Ray was his boy's name.

To get his mind off of it, I said, "I'll go get some hamburgers."

"No, go on home," he said.

"No," I said. "I'll go get some hamburgers." I didn't want him dwelling on it.

"All *right!*" he said, shaking the

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paper hard, like it was alive.

When I came back, he was out talking to three boys who looked like they were from the college down the street. I thought that was good for him, but he came back to the shack swearing.

"They're running a booth at the school carnival Friday and Saturday," he said. "They want an old junker to give people three whacks at for a quarter, with a sledgehammer. Is that what they learn in college nowdays?"

He took a bottle out of the lower right drawer of the desk. "If I say nix, no kid down there will come up here to buy. I told them to come back Friday. They can have that green '49 coupe out there." He took a long swig from the bottle. "Here," he said. "Drink to Lily and Mike. I hope they know what they're getting into."

I took a drink while he started picking at his hamburger.

It misted Wednesday night and I was glad Thursday morning. I could make myself useful wiping off cars. I kept thinking where I'd find another job. Nobody wants you when you're 68.

I had all the cream puffs—that's the best ones—wiped off when John got down. Just before noon, he got a deposit on a station wagon from a young fellow with a wife and three kids tagging along. I thought that would make him feel good.

He went to lunch late, like he always does, and he was still gone when his wife Dorothy drove in. I got up and grabbed a rag when I saw her coming, because if she got the idea he didn't need me, she'd never let him forget it.

She sat in her car and honked, loud. I went over. "Where is he?" she said.

"Still out to lunch, Miz Forbes. He oughta be back any minute."

"He *ought* to be here now!" She leaned over to turn up the car radio and I could see where she hadn't got the makeup in the creases in the back of her neck. She was getting old. She looked over her shoulder and said, "Well, what are *you* gawking at?"

I went over and pretended a bumper was her, and spit on it and wiped it off.

He came back about ten minutes later. He was facing me when he went up to her car, so I could hear him. She said something and he said, "Well get your deposit back, because we can't afford it. Are you crazy?"

She said something fast and he interrupted, "I'm telling you, no! You shoot your face off and we don't go, people'll think I got money trouble. The bank'll clamp down on me."

I worked over to where I could hear her, too.

She started the car with a ba-ROOM. "You're not going to deprive me. I'll tell *everybody* to-

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night, and then you won't dare back down. And thanks for the idea!"

He lifted his hand like he was going to grab her, or hit her.

She ducked away and stepped on the gas and backed out so fast her wheels kicked gravel all over the cars near the street.

He almost tore the shack door off the hinges going in. I took the long way around, so it wouldn't look like I was listening in. When I came in, he looked at me like I was a stranger, and then went back to staring at nothing.

Finally, he said, "She wants a trip around the world!"

I knew what would happen to my job if he went around the world. I didn't even want him thinking about it, so I said, "You think that fella can get a loan on that station wagon?"

"I'd like to send her," he said. "One way."

"Wife and three kids," I said. "Maybe he don't make enough to qualify."

"He better, or I keep a piece of his deposit. I'm not in business for my health." He looked at his watch and picked up the phone. In a minute he was arguing with some new car dealer about how much a '51 convertible trade-in was worth.

When he hung up, he smiled a big smile. "No wonder they can't make any money. We pay *our* price and all we got to do is go get it. We'll go out in my car and you can bring it back and I'll bring the convertible."

"Now?"

"Sure now!"

On the way out, I noticed he was almost out of gas. He give me money and said I could get gas on the way back to the lot. When we got to this dealer's, the battery was dead on the convertible. We stood around about fifteen minutes waiting for them to get it started, with John looking at his watch every couple of minutes.

Finally he said, "I want to get home before she leaves for the club. You stick around and bring this clunk."

"I can take it on down to the lot."

"You can *not*."

I got over to his house about a half-hour later. He lived sort of out in the country. His car was gone but hers was still in the driveway. I figured maybe he'd went on but when I rang the doorbell, he answered.

He had a dark drink in his hand that looked like mostly whiskey and he told me to come on and have one. Going through the living room, I noticed a little metal table lamp turned over on a magazine rack, and an ash tray spilled upside down on the rug, like there'd been trouble.

In the rumpus room I said I didn't see his car outside. He said, "She took it. She went out of here

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in one of her wild crazy rushes."

"It's almost out of gas," I said.

"Oh hell!" he said. "I don't want a lecture on that. Fix yourself a drink. I better catch her."

He rushed out. Looking out the window, I saw him back the convertible out, in too big a hurry to take his wife's car.

I made my own drink and sat down to watch television. I guess I dozed because the next thing I remember, he was back at the bar, drinking from a shot glass.

"Catch her?" I said.

"No," he said. "I had an accident." He poured himself another shot. I hit someone—I think. Out on Mosley Road. I came around this turn and was on him before I saw him, walking—"

"Walking?" I thought he'd hit another car. "Did you hurt him?"

"That's it." He held up the shot glass and looked at it. "I went back—but I couldn't find anyone. I went on down toward the club but I didn't see her, so I came back by. I didn't see anything."

"Maybe you just hit a cow or something."

"You think you can get that old heap down to the lot?"

"Sure."

"Okay. The key's in it. Get going."

I didn't know how many drinks he'd had, and he was wrought up on top of it. He probably hadn't hit anything at all. Mosley's a gravel road and sometimes gravel slows you up just like you hit something.

I walked around the convertible after I parked it on the back of the lot. The right front headlight was busted and there were still some slivers inside the lens. I picked one out and the edge of it shined, like it had just been busted. He still could have just kicked up a big rock.

Just the same, I didn't sleep any better Thursday night, and when the wife woke up and found me still awake, she didn't go back to sleep, either. She knew something was wrong. And I knew if John got arrested, Dorothy'd shut the lot in a minute.

I was down to the lot way before John Friday morning. When he came in, he acted like he'd convinced himself it was just gravel or a rock or something. I told him there wasn't anything in the morning paper about anyone getting hit out on Mosley Road.

About eleven-fifteen, a fellow came in and paid cash down on a '57 hardtop. John wrote up his loan application and took it up to the bank. He'd been back about ten minutes when the police came in.

One stayed in the car blocking the driveway and the other one came in and showed John his badge.

"Where's your wife, Mr. Forbes?"

"Home, I guess. Why?"

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"Was she home when you left this morning?"

"No. She went to a party last night at Blue Brook Country Club. I guess she stayed all night with some friend, like she does. Why? She had an accident?"

"She's had an accident. You better come with us." The policeman backed out of the way and waved toward the police car.

She was dead. Anybody could guess that. And I had a good idea what it was John hit on Mosley Road. She must've run out of gas and been walking to a filling station.

The police brought John back around four o'clock. He stayed in the back seat of the police car and one of them came into the shack. "Where were you last night?" he asked me.

"Out at John's house."

"What for?"

I told him.

"How long were you there?" The policeman pushed a loan application pad around the desk with a pencil, but he watched me out of the tops of his eyes.

"Seven, seven-thirty, I guess. Maybe eight. Why?"

"How come so long?"

"We had some drinks."

"Mr. Forbes was there all the time?"

"Sure." I looked him right in the eye. I had my job to think about.

"We'll check you out."

"Go ahead." As few houses as there were out around John's it'd be a miracle if anyone saw him leave or come back.

"Okay." The policeman tapped my shoulder and went out to the car. He let John out. John came up to the shack and the police drove off.

"What'd he ask you?" he said.

I told him.

He sat down at his desk and drew a heavy black frame in the center of the loan application pad. "They found Dorothy dead. On Mosley Road—this morning."

I picked up a couple of dustcloths from the pile back of the door. "I better wipe off that hardtop. If that fellow gets his loan, he'll want his car today yet."

"You do that," John said. He threw down the pencil and picked up the phone.

In a few minutes he came out and said he was going up to the bank to pick up the papers on the hardtop. He took hold of my arm. "You hear what I said about where they found her?"

"She ought to of knowed a twisty road like that was dangerous to walk on at night," I said. "She was liable to get hit by anybody that came along." I didn't feel sorry for her. She never was nice to me.

"Sure." He let go of my arm. "I wish I was a thousand miles from here and still going." He started away. "I'll be right back."

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I got the feeling that he might just keep going. I went down to the corner and bought an evening paper. Her picture and the story was on the third page. I sat down on the shack steps to read it, and some words jumped out at me.

"The body was found in the roadside grass midway in a half-mile straightaway on the otherwise winding road," the paper said.

I guess then's when I stopped fooling myself. Maybe he didn't leave his house intending to kill her. But when he saw her walking on that lonely road, and he knew she was going to make a fool of him that night and the rest of his life, with not even his daughter around to make it any easier . . .

He should know I wouldn't say anything, because he knew how bad I needed my job. But I wouldn't have any job if he ran away—so I had to keep him there, some way.

Something made me look up, and there were the same two policemen again, walking down the front row of cars. I started to hurry out, then I thought how it would look. So I yelled, "Want something?"

"Just looking," one of them yelled back. Maybe they thought I was too dumb to recognize them.

I went in and got the phone book and looked up the college phone number. I told the girl that answered that I wanted to talk to whoever was running the carnival. Some boy answered after a minute, and I told him they better come get their junker because it was almost closing time. He said they'd be right up.

I hung up and sat holding the paper and watching the policemen. They looked over every car, and they were about halfway through the lot before the college boys came tearing in, five of them in an old club coupe. They all crowded into the shack.

"Where is it?" asked the one with the money.

"Out here," I said. "You gotta tow it. We'll lend you a license and a tow chain, but you got to bring them back tomorrow. One of you come help me and the rest of you back your car into the driveway."

I led one of them out to the '51 convertible.

"You gonna give us *this* for fifty bucks?" he said.

The police were only two rows away.

"The engine's shot," I said. "Come on, let's get going."

The others came over to help and we finally got it hooked up to their car. Just as they piled into their car, one of the policemen came over.

"Where you going with that thing?"

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I said, "They bought it as is." I got myself between him and them, so they couldn't hear me. "I guess they're gonna try and get it running."

"Won't run now, huh?"

"That heap?"

He stepped back and waved them on. I walked real careful back to the shack. By Monday that convertible'd be a pile of iron in some junkyard. Let the police try to identify it then.

The policemen were almost through the lot when John came back. He jumped out of his car and hurried over to follow them. When they came to the last row, he stopped like he'd been hit. I knew what was wrong with him. He saw the convertible gone.

They stopped almost in front of the green '49 coupe the college boys were supposed to get, and I heard them say something about a routine check. They walked out, and he came up the shack steps two at a time.

"The college kids came for their old junker," I said.

"Old junker? It's still out there! Where's the—?"

"You know," I said, "that '51 convertible. Here's their money. I bet they have it so busted up no one will recognize it, by midnight tonight."

He took the money and smoothed down every little corner. When he got it all straightened, he held out a five. "Here's your commission, my friend."

"I didn't sell it."

"You did better than that. Take it! Don't argue. I've had enough arguin'. Now go on home. Take the rest of the day off." He laughed free-like and poked me in the chest with one finger. "But be here on time in the morning—hangover or not!"

He knew I couldn't afford enough whiskey to get a hangover.

When I got home, the wife wanted to put the extra five dollars away but I told her about the carnival, and said we certainly could afford the dollar or so it would cost to eat at the outdoor lunch stand down there.

She said all right, if we walked and saved the carfare.

We had a real nice meal at the carnival for a dollar-fifty-five for both of us and then we played two games of bingo, three cards each game because they were three cards for a quarter. We didn't win anything, but the wife likes to play. I felt like we could afford it, now that I didn't have to worry about my job. John had plenty of reason to want to take care of me.

When we went by the booth where they were smashing the '51 convertible, the wife wanted to watch. So we sat on a bench back a ways from the roped-off booth, which was real busy.

Mostly the customers were boys

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showing off for the girls with them, or other girls standing around. One girl in little striped shorts tried it, but when she heaved the sledgehammer up in the air it flew back over her shoulder and her boy friend caught her and she dropped it. Everyone laughed.

That was when I noticed John. I heard his sort of chuckle, and I turned around. He was standing kind of in a shadow behind us. He said hello to the wife and me. "They're sure making mincemeat out of that thing, aren't they?" he said, sounding like he was enjoying it.

"Oh, Mr. Forbes," the wife blurted out. "I'm so sorry about your wife."

"Thank you." He came up and leaned on the back of the bench with his hands and we had to half turn around to talk to him. It made me uncomfortable. "It's hard," he said. "Makes you feel like chucking everything."

The wife didn't understand, because I hadn't told her anything. "But you've got your business—and your friends!" She grabbed my hand. "And I don't know where Dad would find another job!" Her fingernails dug into me till it hurt.

"Now, Kitty," I said, kind of irritated. "John don't mean it."

"I do," he said. "I ought to get away. I need a change of scenery."

"Oh!" the wife said. She took a handkerchief out of her coat pocket and started dabbing at her eyes.

"He doesn't mean it," I told her. "Look at that old junker," I said, louder. "Somebody could get hurt by pieces flying. Good thing we took off the windshield."

"And the only other glass is the —". He didn't say "headlights." He came around the bench and crossed over to the ropes in about three strides, pushing people aside to get closer. He came back just as fast. "The headlights," he said.

"I took them off," I said. "Just to be safe. Kitty, I told you—"

"Where are they?"

"I threw one of them away."

"They could be off my '51 model."

"That boy taking tickets looks like the one that helped me take them off," I said. "We had to break off one of the bolts that was rusted on. I bet he'd remember."

The wife said, "Oh, Dad!"

"John was just talking," I said. "Tell her, John."

"Sure," he said, looking at me. I looked straight at him. "Sure. I was just talking. Pop's right. I'm gonna take care of you."

"Oh thank you, Mr. Forbes!" the wife said, and I had to stop her from taking his hand.

"See you in the morning, John," I said. I was mad.

"Sure," he said. "Bright and early."

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I was down there early, too, but he was late. I waited till he got there before I started wiping the cars, because I didn't want to be around him. He stayed in the shack, except twice when he came out to talk to lookers. He kept looking at his watch while he was talking to them, like he was late for an appointment, or expecting someone.

I got so mad thinking about how he'd scared the wife that I stopped wiping cars and sat down on a bumper out of sight of the shack. After a while he came over where I was.

"What made you think I wouldnt' look out for you, after what you did for me?"

"You shouldn't of talked so much about closing up the lot and leaving."

"I suppose if I did, you'd go to the cops?" He looked at his watch again. That made me mad, because I can't even afford to have my old one fixed.

"I sure will!"

"You figure they found pieces of the headlight out there, don't you?"

"It got busted there, didn't it?"

"So you've got the busted headlight hid around your house—"

"Didn't say it was around the house!"

"Where else? In your safety deposit—?"

"Never mind!" I walked away from him, and he followed me. When we came around the end of the row, I saw the two policemen, on the steps to the shack.

They came right over.

The one that looks out of the tops of his eyes looked at me and said, "What made you suspect him?"

"Suspect who?" I said. "I don't suspect nobody of anything." I had to keep my temper. All I wanted was to keep my job.

John said, "I told you. When I saw that clunker down at the street fair with headlights gone."

The one cop kept looking at me. "Where'd you drive that convertible Thursday night?"

"Down here to the lot," I said. "I told you."

"Nowhere else?"

"No!"

"Then why'd you hide that busted headlight in your attic?" said the one off to my side.

"Who says?" I said

"Come on, Pop. You had it in an old pink blanket. We got it in our car right now."

"He did it!" I said, and I started for John. They grabbed me, one on each side. I tried to jerk loose, and they twisted my arms. "He went after her because she was out of gas and he saw her walking and he killed her! He hated her! Let me go!" I tried to get loose, but they twisted my arms till I cried.

"You said he never left the house," one said, close to my ear.

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I tried to bite him, and the other one twisted my arm till it cracked.

"I wanted to hold it over him. I didn't want to lose my job. I got a wife to support!"

Behind me, John said, "I shouldn't of let him have all those drinks."

They started to pull me but I wouldn't walk. "Little late to think of that," one of them said, starting to drag me. "Come on, old man, stand up."

"He did it!" I said. "I know he did it! I got the evidence!"

They dragged me to the car and pushed me in the back seat. I kicked at them and one of them jumped in on top of me and twisted my arms behind me and put handcuffs on me. He was puffing. "If *he* did it, what's the headlight doing in *your* attic?"

"I told you! I need my job!"

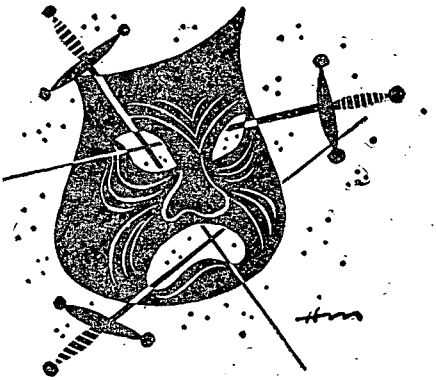
The one outside said, "Anyone to look after his wife?"

"I'll take care of her," John said.

"Don't let him!" I yelled. "He'll kill her! She don't know nothing about it!"

The one in back shoved my face down into the seat till I couldn't breathe.

I felt the car start off with me still on my knees on the floor in back, everything red.



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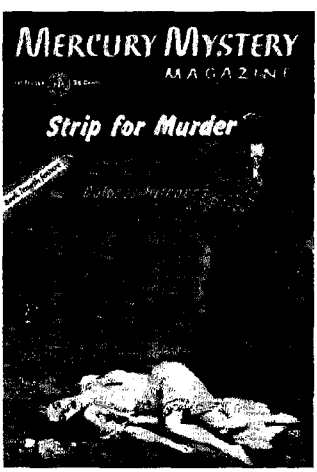

Strip For Murder

Mark Bellew was a distributor — of masculine entertainment, that is. It was only natural that he become disturbed at the threatening letters and just as logical that he show them to his friend, insurance investigator Ed Warne. Warne showed a friendly interest, but when he found himself receiving theatening phone calls and using Marine tactics to defend himself, he decided it was time to get a little less friendly and a little more interested . . . *don't miss STRIP FOR MURDER, a full length thriller by Dolores Hitchens in the October MERCURY MYSTERY MAGAZINE.*

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